

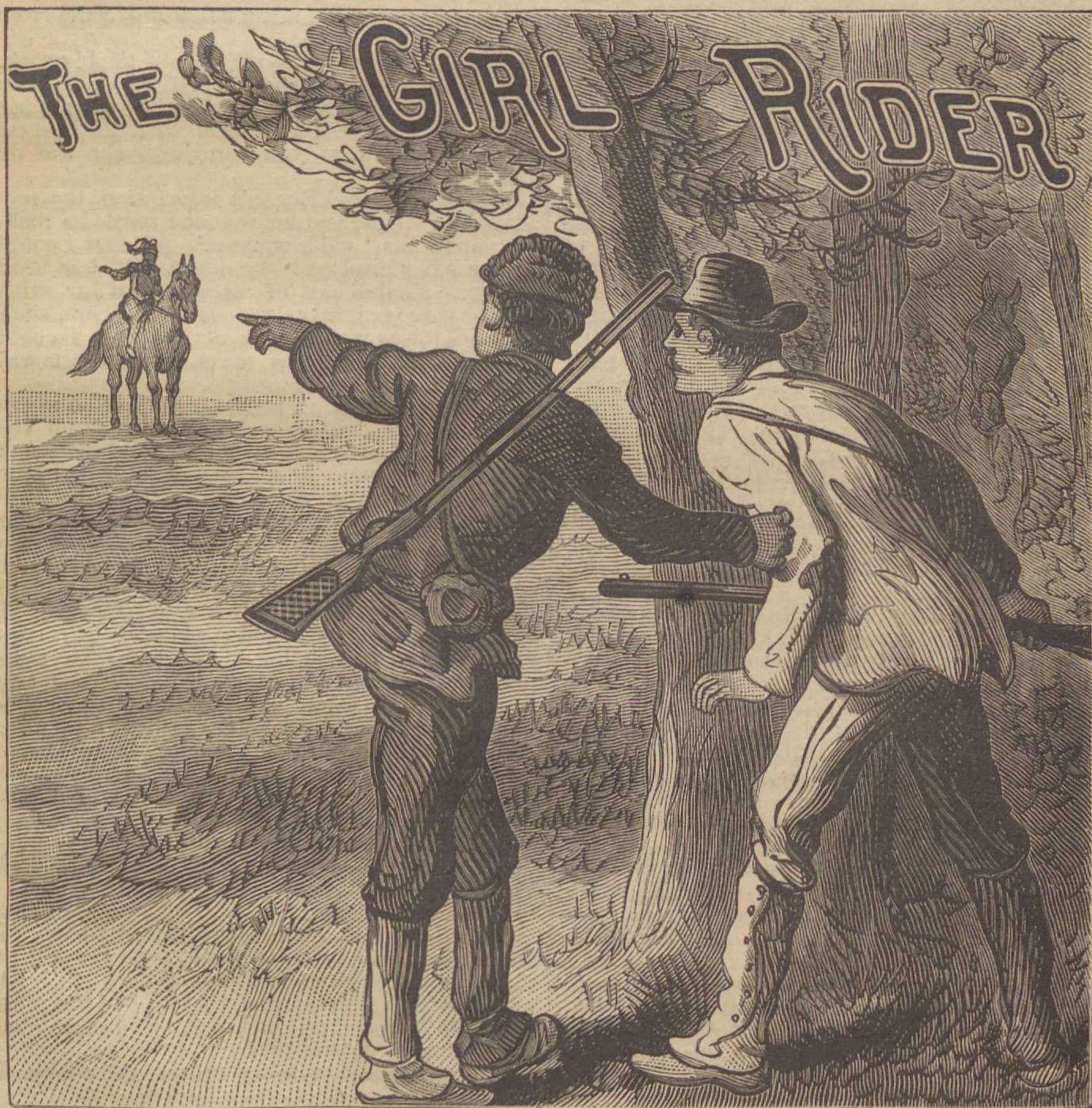
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"THE STRANGE GIRL RIDER—THE ONE THAT DECEYED FRED HAWKSLEY FROM US!" GASPED NED,
IN WONDERMENT.

The Girl Rider;

OR,

NIMBLE NED'S SURPRISE.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "NIGHT-HAWK KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," "BLACK GIANT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGE RIDER.

"BAH! for my part, I believe it sheer nonsense—nothing but a hoax."

"So said I until lately; but now I *know* there is something in it."

The sentences just noted were spoken in very dissimilar tones: the first one careless and slightly scoffing—the second low and earnest. Both speakers were young and of prepossessing appearance.

The scene was an attractive one, though somewhat similar ones have been described time and time again. In fact it was the bivouac of a hunting-party.

In conscious security they had kindled their camp-fire, and now, without a thought of danger, were enjoying that indispensable luxury of a true plainsman—pipes and tobacco.

As already incidentally mentioned, the party consisted of half a score of hunters, all young—the eldest scarcely numbering thirty years. Their hair was worn long; scarcely one of their faces had ever known the touch of a razor, giving their beards a glossy silkiness seldom seen, that even the scorching sun or crinkling winds of winter could not destroy.

"What do you mean by that, Fred?" quickly added the first speaker, Edward Campbell, familiarly known as Nimble Ned—a tall, stalwart youth, who, despite his few years, had already gained a widely-known reputation for agility in Texas.

"Just what I say, Ned," and Fred Hawksley spoke in a serious tone. "I *know* there is such a being, because I have seen her—yes, and spoken to her, too."

A general movement followed this announcement, and it was plain that the subject under discussion possessed no little interest to the hunters. Still, despite Hawksley's earnestness, they seemed to doubt.

"You have never mentioned this before, Fred. Are you sure there is no mistake?"

"Am I a fool, Ned Campbell?" retorted the young man, coolly. "I tell you that I saw a mysterious girl rider only three days ago, not two miles from this very spot. And I spoke to her, too, as I told you before."

"That's why you were so urgent for us to encamp here, was it?" laughed Ned. "But never mind—tell us all about it now."

"Yes—who is she? What did she look like? Did she answer you?" eagerly cried several of the little band.

"Well, I'll tell you all I know about it, provided you promise not to make fun of me."

"You're not at another of your sells, are you, Fred? Honest Injun now."

"No, Ned, I mean just what I say."

"That's enough. Go on. When you talk like that, we know you're not fooling."

"Well, as I said, I saw her three days ago, out just beyond the big red rock; you know where that is. I didn't mention it to any of you, because we had all been deriding Hark Bogan so unmercifully about her, that I was ashamed to tell what I had seen. You may remember that I was unusually quiet that night after getting back to camp. I told you I felt tired, but I was *thinking*."

"You know that the red rock is just on the top of a high swell—the highest ground for miles around. I was climbing this—as my nag was tired and heavily loaded with meat—on foot. Mott suddenly raised his head and whickered. Even had there not come a quick reply, that would have told me there was another horse near by, but a neigh *did* come from directly ahead of me."

"I was then almost on the top of the big rock. And there, beside it, the Girl Rider was. You know how high the rock is. Well, as she sat her horse, her head was on a level with the highest part of the rock, so you can judge she was no baby."

"I remembered Bogan's description the moment I saw this, and knew that I must be looking upon his 'wild woman.' At first I could only see her head and shoulders. On her head she wore a small cap of some kind of fur, with two or three brightly dyed eagle-feathers, such as the Kiowas wear. Her dress—what I could see of it—seemed to be made of tanned fawn-skin, trimmed in Indian style."

"Thinking this, I kept on until close to the rock and not half a dozen lengths from the stranger. Then she lifted a hand and motioned for me to pause. That she meant this, I saw from her turning the muzzle of a light, handsome rifle toward my breast, it resting between the ears of her horse. She seemed like one who had smelled powder before, and I obeyed her."

"Now I could see that she was white—though her complexion was that of a rich brunette. A more beautiful face I never saw. I can't describe it—only that her great big eyes were black and shining as those of a deer; that her figure was the most superbly developed, the most symmetrical that I ever beheld in my life. Boys, that face and figure have haunted me ever since. If that woman is as good and pure as she is beautiful, she would be well worth dying for!" suddenly added Hawksley, puffing vigorously at his extinguished pipe.

"And still better living for—eh, Fred?" and Ned laughed. "But go on—you spoke to her—this marvelous beauty?"

"Yes—but not until she spoke first to me. I was still staring at her, amazed, for I knew that she did not live anywhere around here—at least with any one I knew, and there's few families in the State that I do not know. She said:

"What is your name?"

"Just that and nothing more. Of course I told her."

"Ha! ha! the invincible conquered—Fred Hawksley in love with the fair unknown!"

"Laugh if you will, Ned," was the sober reply, "I half believe it myself. But as I said, I

answered her. She did not speak again, but gave me a look—a glance that set my brain afire—my heart to throbbing like a trip-hammer. Then she touched the rein and shot off to the right, swift as an arrow. At a little distance she paused and raised one hand toward me. I was dumfounded then, but since, I believe that she meant it as a *challenge* to me. I did mount Mott, but jaded as he was, I knew that he stood no chance in a race with that mustang.

"Ned, as I rode slowly toward camp, the strange woman, whoever she may be, fairly rode round me, then with a clear, taunting laugh, gave loose rein, and dashed away over the prairie like a bird. In five minutes she was out of sight. Now, boss, you know all that I know about the matter."

"Hark!"

There was little need of the exclamation, for all, both human and quadruped, heard the sound that called it forth, the quick, rapid thud of a horse's hoofs upon the solid prairie. All eyes were instantly turned toward the arch before alluded to.

The hunters felt only curiosity, for they knew that only one horseman approached. Then a simultaneous cry broke from their lips, as they discovered the beautiful Girl Rider. For a moment they appeared awe-stricken.

Sitting a noble-looking mustang beneath the leafy canopy, with form perfectly outlined against the still glowing sky in the west, was none other than the strange being who had formed the subject of conversation for the past half-hour. Her features were indistinctly visible, but there could be no mistake.

She sat her horse in true savage style—astride, and, with a dress fashioned for that purpose, as was hers, the effect was far from displeasing. Her dress flashed back the firelight in a thousand scintillations, from the beads and silver ornaments that quickly studded its folds. The long black hair, slightly curling at the extremities, floated in wild profusion around her form. A light rifle was carelessly balanced across the deep-seated Mexican saddle. Other weapons gleamed from the belt that encircled her round, compact waist.

"Who and what are you, anyhow?" cried Ned, breaking the spell with an effort.

The only reply was a low, clear laugh, melodious as the notes of a silver bell. Hawksley had not exaggerated in the least. The most skeptical now acknowledged this, mentally, if not aloud.

"Keep her in sight, Ned," muttered Fred, as he arose. "If Mott can do it, I'll answer that question before I'm an hour older."

At his movement, the strange rider wheeled her mustang and seemed ready for flight, her face turned, glancing back over her shoulder.

"I can drop the piebald without hurting her," muttered Campbell, half-inquiringly.

"No—that would never do. We have no right. Keep her in sight—I think I can over-haul her," and Hawksley uttered a low whistle, at the same time gliding toward where his saddle and bridle hung.

With another clear laugh, the strange rider turned, and, bending low along the spotted mus-

tang's neck, dashed around the timber. Ned rushed to the arch, then paused, muttering eagerly:

"Quick, Fred—she's waiting for you!"

Such indeed seemed the case. The woman had only retreated a few hundred yards from the bivouac, and then, as if feeling implicit confidence in the powers of the animal she bestrode, had halted, once more glancing back toward the camp-fire. Her actions were strange as her appearance. She seemed inviting—challenging pursuit.

In less than a minute from her first appearance, Fred Hawksley sprung upon his noble beast, and dashed through the arch out upon the prairie. The strange rider uttered another laugh, clear and silvery, yet with a taunting cadence that caused the young hunter's blood to tingle and his lips to compress firmly. He resolved to overtake the woman, even if it cost him the noble steed he bestrode.

"We'll follow on after you, Fred," cried Ned, as his friend dashed past him. "Don't be rash—there may be some deviltry in this!"

The strange rider tossed back her floating hair with one hand, as the young borderer sprung into view; then with a peculiar cry she gave her mustang free rein, and sped away with the speed of a swallow. After her thundered the big yellow horse, with the long, swinging stride that Fred knew few mustangs could successfully cope with, beyond anything over a mile dash.

"Quick, boys—saddle up!" cried Ned, excitedly. "Never mind the meat. I'm afraid that Fred is running into some trouble—that creature has bewitched him. See! he forgot his rifle—but he has his pistol. Make haste! we mustn't lose sight of them if we can help it, though the moon is full and will soon be up. We can follow their trail, if needs be."

There was little hesitation. Though the day's work had been hard, both men and beasts were for a race, and this was no common one. Already the young hunters possessed a burning curiosity to know who and what this strange woman rider really was, and what was the motive of her strange actions.

Hopples were slipped, saddles and bridles quickly adjusted, and then, weapons in hand, the little party dashed swiftly beneath the natural rock, out upon the broad prairie. But where were the two riders—their friend and the strange woman?

For a moment a superstitious thrill agitated the young hunters, but then Ned laughed. He saw their foolishness.

"They're beyond the swell—we'll see them in a moment. Come on—keep up with me if you can!"

His companions followed more deliberately, though at a steady gallop. The moonlight was sufficiently strong to enable them to follow the plainly imprinted trail with little difficulty. In a few minutes they lost sight of Ned Campbell, behind a timber island.

Round a point of this the trail led, and dashing along, the eyes of the pursuers wildly dilated as they abruptly drew rein. The prairie here stretched out free of timber, almost level for several miles in either direction. And yet not a living object was to be seen upon its surface!

The Girl Rider.

Was this magic? More than one of the hunters felt a thrill of superstitious awe, as they glanced at each other. Where was Hawksley and the Girl Rider? Where was Ned Campbell!

"Look!" muttered a tall, lank youth, Zebedee Ruel by name, "hyar's tha'r trail—three critters goin' at full split. They've passed this-a-way. Reckon we'd best follow on—what say?"

The trail was faint and indistinct at this point, for the ground was harder, ringing sharply beneath the iron-shod hoofs. It was the edge of a tract of prairie sometimes found in Texas—more frequently in Kansas and Nebraska—composed of sand, gravel and flinty pebbles, over which a horse may pass without leaving a trail.

Such was soon found to be the case here. Though all dismounted, even searching the ground upon hands and knees, the trail was soon lost.

"Ha! boys, we're fools!" muttered Craig Fenton, in a tone of disquiet. "Don't you know this place? Why, we're not five miles from Colton's Ranch!"

"By thunder! you're right, Craig," muttered Ruel. "Then they must be in the—"

"Look yonder!"

Following the direction indicated by the outstretched finger, the hunters beheld the tall figure of a horseman, standing motionless upon the prairie, not two hundred yards from their position. And yet only a moment before, the prairie had been closely scanned, without a living object being seen.

CHAPTER II.

THE LOTTERY OF DEATH.

OTHER events were occurring upon that same night, that now claim our attention.

A small timber island that stood close beside the stream before spoken of as running near the hunter's bivouac, was the scene of a strange and peculiar trial; one that might with propriety be termed a *lottery of death*.

Shortly after dark a band of horsemen began congregating here, riding silently into the road, dismounting and tethering their animals in a small glade that occupied the center of the motte. That they were white men was plain from the few words spoken, though the overhanging trees concealed their features.

One man who was among the first to arrive, appeared high in authority, judging from the deference with which he was regarded by the others. He seemed ill at ease, or very impatient, moving restlessly to and fro, muttering more than one curse beneath his breath, stamping his foot fiercely or nervously fingering the weapon at his belt.

"How many are there here, Thompson?" he uttered, abruptly pausing beside a tall, muscular frame.

"Seventeen, by my count, Cap'n Jap," replied the man with the stumpy pipe, still clinched betwixt his teeth. "Thar's two more yit—Colton an' Marcks."

"Can it be that he suspects the purpose of our meeting to-night? The soft-headed fool may have seen his brother since then, and as he knows the laws of our band, that would put him on his guard. Let him beware! He'd bet-

ter cut his own throat than to prove false to us now."

"True as preachin', Cap'n Jap," quoth Thompson. "We'd sarve him wuss'n we did Hans Koch. But he'll be here, I reckon. He's most al'ays behindhan'."

"Start the fire, Jim. We must have light for the drawing. Ha! there comes some one now!"

"Yes—an' it's *him*, too. He rides the only racker in the band."

"Good!" then adding, in a low, rapid tone; "You must watch him close, Thompson. When he learns what is on the boards, he may cut up nasty. Keep close enough to him to grab him if I give the word. You understand?"

"Bet ye—I'll do it, never fear," muttered the man, as he gathered a handful of dried leaves and grass.

"Well, Colton," sternly uttered the man addressed as Captain Jap—his name being Jasper Morton—turning to the last comer, "you are late, as usual."

"I could not help it, Captain Morton. I was kept—"

"No excuses. But if you ever hope to rise higher in the band, you must break yourself of this habit. Only for one thing, you would have been discharged from the league, long ago."

"And that is—"

"We know you would betray us before the week was out. There—you need not deny it. I know you too well. I merely mentioned this now because I believe you need a hint of the kind. You are watched—I tell you that much. You remember Hans Koch? It has not been so long since that you should forget his fate. Take care that we do not have to deal with you in that manner."

"What have I done that you should threaten me in this manner, Captain Morton? Have I ever proved false—haven't I always obeyed orders?"

"There—don't get your back up, Jack Colton. What I say is for your own good. If I am not mistaken you will be tested to-night, more severely than you think. See to it that you do not fail. If you do—you die!"

"I don't understand you."

"You will, before long. That will do, Thompson. We only require a little light, and some prying eye might catch the glimmer. Now, men," he added, after a brief pause, "gather round and listen well to what I say. We have work to do this night—some of you may know what I mean, but most of you do not. Listen, well, but keep silence."

"First, a word as to the objects of our league, then as to our laws. It will do no harm to freshen your memory on these points. We all know our calling—our name, for it is *confiscation*—others call it stealing; but that don't matter. Among ourselves we are 'Night Hawks.' To others we are simple cattle-drivers, mustangers, or quiet settlers."

"We have been organized some six months. In that time our profits have been nearly two thousand dollars per man; a little better than simple farming. But it will be better still, now that our markets are fairly opened, and a chain

established along which we can ship our plunder without chance of being detected. All this, however, you know.

"Now about our laws. The first is—*death to all traitors*. The next—*death to those who stubbornly refuse to perform the duty assigned to them*. Our motto is, blood for blood. If a member of our league is taken prisoner, we swear to free him, though it cost the lives of half our number. If one is killed, we swear to avenge him.

"You all remember Hans Koch. He warned a friend that we intended cleaning out his corral on a certain night. A trap was set for us, but we escaped it, because a trusted spy discovered Koch's treachery. You know that Koch met his reward. I killed him, because the lot fell to me. Had I refused, your laws would have condemned me, even though I was twice your leader. You wonder why I say all this? I will tell you now.

"You know that Koch's death reduced the number of our league to twenty. There are only eighteen here now. One—Tony Marcks—is absent on duty assigned him by me. The other—Israel Hackett—is dead."

A low murmur of surprise followed this announcement, and it was evident that few, if any of the band had known of their comrade's fate. Jasper Morton waved his hand for silence, then resumed:

"Yes, Israel Hackett is dead—he was killed last night while performing his duty. He was one of our best men, and now duty becomes a pleasure—we must avenge him as our laws demand."

"He shall be avenged; the name? who killed him?" came the fierce cry from more than one pair of lips.

"Keep cool—all in good time, men. We will proceed by rule. It is only one man. And upon one of us the duty falls. We will decide by *the lottery*. It is the fairest way. Thompson—the pouch!"

A small, narrow buckskin bag was handed the leader, who knelt beside the small fire that flickered faintly and feebly. At a gesture from him the outlaws—for such they undoubtedly were—gathered more closely around, bending forward and watching his every motion.

"You know the rules of this—that a bullet shall be placed in the bag for each and every person present, all but one of them being old and stained by rubbing together—the other one bright and new. Then we draw, one by one, until the bright bullet is chosen. The man who draws that is the one chosen executioner. There can be no refusal, no retreating. It is a sacred command, and the one who refuses to obey proclaims himself a traitor. Do you all understand me?"

"Yes—we are all ready!"

"And *you?*" turning abruptly toward the man he had called Jack Colton.

"I vow with the rest—I am ready," came the quiet reply.

"Good! I confess that I had some doubts, for you have acted rather queerly since Koch's death," sneered Morton.

"He was my friend: you cannot blame me for feeling touched at his horrible death."

"There is nothing wrong in that—only beware that you do not let your friendship carry you in his footsteps. His wretched fate would be happiness compared with yours, in that case."

Morton seemed to have some secret spite against this member of his band, but Colton commanded himself by an effort of will and with a scowl the outlaw leader turned once more to the subject in hand.

"Thompson, mold a bullet, your molds run the truest. Make haste."

Five minutes later, all was ready. Jasper Morton took the bullets—one bright as silver, the others all dingy and dark—and slowly dropped them one by one into the buckskin pouch, so that all could see. Then he shook them up thoroughly.

"Now, as I call, let each man step forward and draw. You are standing in a circle. I will begin here at my right hand, and go to the left. When you draw, open your hand and hold the bullet in the firelight so that all may see. You first, Wilkins!"

The man advanced, plunged his hand into the pouch, withdrew it, holding the pellet of lead where the firelight shone full upon it. It was dark and dingy.

So were the next half-dozen drawn. Some seemed pleased at the result, others indifferent, but one uttered a low curse, as though he had been deprived of a prized boon in not drawing the bright bullet.

Jack Colton came next, and the features of the outlaw chief lighted up with a gleam of malignant joy, as the young man held up the fatal pellet. It was just what he had been longing for. Had he known the meaning of the word, it is probable that he would have prayed for this result.

"You are the elected, Colton," he cried, in a voice that rung with triumph. "*Your* hand must deal the avenging blow. But first—to show that all was conducted fair. See—here are the other bullets. All are dark—you drew the only bright one. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, I am satisfied. I will avenge Hackett, since fate selects me. Tell me the name, and what I must do," quietly replied the young man.

"You must kill him, and before morning. Such are the rules. No unnecessary delay."

"I know—his name?" impatiently.

"Listen. Of course I am very sorry that it has happened as it has. It would have been better had the choice fallen on some other man; but since you *are* elected, you must forget all save that you belong to this league," and as he spoke Morton's eyes gleamed with diabolical joy.

"What do you mean by this?" faltered Colton, his bronzed cheek paling.

"Only to prepare you. Israel Hackett was killed by *your* brother, Henry Colton!"

"My God!" gasped Colton, the terrible truth bursting upon his heart. My brother—and I—but no, no! You can not mean that!"

"Thompson, remember what I told you," cried Morton, sharply shrinking back from before the agitated outlaw, one hand seeking his belt. "Yes, I *do* mean it. Your brother killed Hackett, and he is doomed. You took your

chance with the rest of us—you must fulfill your oath."

"I will not—I'll kill you first!" screamed the unfortunate young man, and in his frenzy, his revolver was jerked from the sheath at his side.

Now Morton's precautions stood him in good stead. Thompson sprung forward and clutched the half-crazed outlaw, pinning his arms closely to his sides, holding him powerless as a child.

Thus assisted, Morton quickly disarmed Colton, then motioned Thompson to release him. With a hot, angry glance around him, the young man stood still, quelling his emotion by a powerful exertion of will.

"Now let me know just what you mean by this action, Jack Colton. Have you forgotten your oath this soon? Do you intend to defy the league?"

"Yes—when you try to make me soil my hands with the blood of a brother," was the firm reply.

"Ah, you remember the tie now, do you?" sneered Morton. "And yet, only a few weeks since, you swore that you'd have his heart's blood. Have you forgotten that he cursed you, and drove you from his door like a dog, because as he said, you insulted his wife?"

"He only served me right. I did insult her, but it was when I was drunk. Never mind that now. I tell you that I will not murder him."

"Take care—you are sealing your own doom by these words. You have been told your duty—obey, or take the consequence."

"Let it come. I am ready."

"Durn the fool—what's the use o' palaverin'?" growled Thompson. "Here's the bullets; shake 'em up, and give him a turn."

"For the last time—will you obey?"

"No."

Again the drawing of the death-lottery was gone through, this time even more deliberately than before. Evidently Morton was anxious to put Colton to death, from some reason of his own. During its progress, the attitude of the prisoner, for such he now was, did not change, but his features altered greatly. His resolution seemed dying out as he noted the cool nonchalance with which the lots were drawn. Life appeared more and more dear to him.

"It's me!" uttered Thompson, with a coarse laugh. "Well, Colton, my boy, since it's so, I reckon I must. How'll you hev it—lead or steel?"

"Neither. Spare me. Do not murder me!" gasped the young man, pale and trembling.

"You know the alternative!" coolly replied Morton. "Do your duty and you are safe."

"You are not jesting—you mean this?"

"Yes. Strike the blow that avenges Israel Hackett, and we will forget that you refused to do your duty."

"I will do it. I did not think it was so hard to die, and he *did* treat me mean—like a dog—he even kicked me!" muttered Colton, tremblingly.

Morton's eyes gleamed. This sudden change seemed to please him greatly. Thompson looked on in disgust. He felt only contempt for this pitiful craven.

"Come, we have lost time enough. Mount, and let's be going. We'll make a clean sweep

of the corrals, too, while about it. Thompson, you and I will keep our friend here company," and Morton glanced significantly at his acolyte.

The little band filed forth from the woods, and then set out over the prairie at a rapid gallop—the one gait of Morton's horsemen. They had only a few miles to travel, and of that they made short work.

Jack Colton rode between Thompson and Morton, his head bowed as though strongly agitated. The outlaw chief was in great spirits. Whatever may have been his object, he was greatly pleased with the course affairs had that night taken.

"Yonder's the ranch," muttered Thompson, slackening his pace. "Now, what's the programme, old man?"

"Well, our first care is to see that Colton here does his duty. Either you or I can go with him to the door, just to keep his courage up, you know; the other can take charge of the men and go through the stables and corral."

"Jest as you say, Cap'n Jap. But how'd we best work it—bu'st in an' take the critter by s'prise, or knock 'im up?"

"Best rap at the door. He'll think it's all right when he hears Jack's voice. And as for you, my man," addressing Colton, "remember that your life depends upon how you act this night. Thompson, you will keep him covered with your pistol, and at the first sign of treachery, drop him. You hear me?"

"Yas—I'll do it, too, so mind yer eye, ole boy," and the tall ruffian uttered an oath to bind his threat.

"You waste a great many words. I have to do this deed, and I will do it. Why do you threaten so much?" quietly added Colton.

"Because I don't half trust you. I believe you are a traitor at heart, and I am half sorry that I gave you another chance at the grove. But take care! You'd better have been born dead than attempt any treachery toward us now. While one of the band lives, your life will be in peril."

"His will may be good a-plenty, but he hain't got the sand in his craw to act the traitor. But never fret, Cap'n Jap. I'll see that he puts Hen Colton out o' the way, or down he goes hisself. Come, we'd better git down here. The houn's begin to smell us a'ready."

The entire party now dismounted, securing their animals to the rude rail fence, at this point being hidden from the house by the long hay-topped stables. After a few whispered instructions from Jasper Morton, Thompson linked his arm in that of Colton, and glided silently toward the house.

As they crossed the stile-blocks, a furious barking broke the air, and half a dozen large hounds came rushing toward them. Thompson cocked his pistol, as he muttered in Colton's ear:

"Quiet 'em, Jack; still the brutes, or you'll never live to make love to Hen's widow!"

"Should you harm me, those brutes would tear you to pieces before you could fire twice," coolly replied Colton. "See—they know me."

The huge hounds had recognized the hand

that had so often fed them in days gone by, and their angry greeting turned to one of joy. With difficulty Colton kept them from leaping upon his body in a swarm, licking his hands and face.

Thompson uttered an oath. The baying of the hounds had aroused the inmates of the building, for a faint light shone through the heavily-shuttered windows.

"Wal, it don't matter much, a'ter all. We won't hev to knock so long. But now mind how ye act, Jack Colton. You see—I hev my shooter cocked an' ready. The fu'st crooked step you make—down goes your apple-cart! Onderstand?"

"Yes. But suppose he refuses to open the door?"

"He won't if you play it fine. You tell him to open: thet you're hard hit—bin in a muss at the Corners. I'll sw'ar to it. Thet'll fetch him, sure. So—kinder lean on me. It'll look better an' 'll hide your barker from him until he comes out. Keep cool now, and mind your eye, for your life depends on your doing this job slick an' without any bunglin'."

"All right. You hail him. I'm hurt too bad to call so loud," added Colton, with a sickly laugh.

"Hellow—the house You, Hen Colton—I say—*durn* it all, man, be ye deaf?" roared Thompson, supporting the young man upon one strong arm.

"What's wanting out there?" demanded a clear, strong voice from the interior.

"You're wanted—got a sick man here thet needs a little doctorin'. Some kin o' your'n, I reckon. Says he's your brother."

"What's that?" and the heavy door was cautiously swung ajar a few inches.

"It's me, Henry," and the young man's voice trembled.

"What's the matter with you?" the settler demanded, a trace of suspicion in his tone.

"Nothin' much—only cut up a little. Monte Pete an' One-eyed Johnny doubled teams on him, down to the Corners. They're subjects for a fu'st-class wake, an' the lad here is hurt consid'able. He would hev me fetch him here—said he wanted to make up 'th you, or somethin' like that. But I reckon he's wu'th two dead critters yit," hastily explained the tall outlaw.

"It's true, Henry. Give me shelter for one night, or until my hurts can be looked to. You will?"

"Of course—you are my brother still, though you had acted twice as bad as you had done. Come—let me help you."

The settler, unsuspecting treachery, stepped out upon the porch, his countenance expressing his anxiety. Then Thompson nudged Jack Colton with his elbow, as he loosened his hold.

What followed was quick as thought. A bright flash—a sharp report—a death-cry of intense agony—a heavy fall upon the broad stone steps.

Then Colton, still clutching the smoking pistol, sprung forward, and seizing his brother pushed him forcibly back into the building, in a moment closing the heavy oaken door and dropping the stout bars into place.

Inside the brothers—outside, what? A writh-

ing, bleeding body from which the life was rapidly ebbing. Thompson the outlaw had been outwitted, and paid the penalty with his life.

As he gave Colton the signal that the time had come for his bloody deed, the young man turned his pistol against his breast, and fired. With bullet-pierced breast, the outlaw fell, dying.

Henry Colton was thunderstruck. At first he believed that the assault was upon him, but when his brother closed and barred the door, with that horrible groaning outside, an inkling of the truth flashed upon his mind.

"What is this—what do you mean Jack?" he gasped, bewildered.

"It means that I have saved your life, Henry, for the present. But come—is the house well secured? We'll have a desperate fight on our hands before many minutes."

"Yes—all is secure. But explain—I don't understand. You are not hurt—that man lied?"

"No, I am well. That was part of a plot. But first—out with the light, then go and tell your wife that you are safe. Tell her that there is no real danger, for we can easily beat them off until day, and they'll not dare stay longer, for fear of the neighbors. Go now—then hasten back here."

Henry Colton followed his brother's advice, for he heard his affrighted wife calling his name in anxious tones from the upper half-story, that answered for sleeping apartments. A true woman of the border, she felt safe on seeing him unhurt, and stilling the child, she hastily dressed and followed her husband to the lower floor.

"Mary, this is no place for you," murmured Henry as she glided to his side. "Go and stay with Tommy. There may be danger here."

"No more to me than to you, Henry. I can load your weapons for you, if you have not time. No—I will not go. Tommy is safe upstairs, and my place is here beside you."

"Let her stay, Henry. It will show me what I have to make amends for. Mary," added Jack, his voice sounding husky, "while I have time, let me pray your forgiveness. I was drunk and half-crazy, or I would have known better than to have insulted you. You will try and forget my words?"

"Yes—and we will be true brother and sister after this. You cannot guess how deeply it hurt me, knowing that I had caused hard feelings between you and Henry."

"He was right—it was my fault. But I'll make amends, if my life is spared."

His brother understood this last remark, though Mary did not, for Jack had, in a few hasty words, told him all. How, when driven from his home by his only brother, he had fallen into the tempter's snare, and become one of Jasper Morton's "Night Hawks." He told him too of the death-doom sworn by the outlaws, and that while one of the Night Hawks lived, neither would be safe from danger. It was this thought that clouded both their brows.

Henry Colton marveled greatly that no attack had been made, though full quarter of an hour had elapsed since the fall of Thompson,

but a word from Jack explained this. The Night Hawks, busy plundering the stables and corral, no doubt fancied that the death-cry proceeded from the settler, and that the chosen executioner had done his work well. But they would soon discover the truth, and then—

"Ha! it's coming now!" muttered Jack Colton, in a low, strained tone, as a peculiar whistle came faintly to their ears. "That's Morton's signal to Thompson."

"Stand in this corner, Mary, out of range. We must show the devils no mercy now, and remember that the more we lay out to-night, the less we will have to fight in the future," sternly added the settler.

"If the moon only shone brighter!" muttered Jack, his eyes gleaming viciously. "I'd give my left hand for a fair shot at that devil, Morton!"

"I know him now. If he's wise, he'll keep out of range. Look! yonder they come!"

The rifles of the brothers clicked ominously, and then two dark muzzles protruded slightly from the small loop-holes. The house had been built with an eye to defense against the Indians, though until now the settler had been unmolested. The outlaw whom he had shot he detected riding off on a valuable stallion, the day before, and at his rifle's crack, Israel Hackett fell dead. Horse-stealing was regarded as an even more heinous crime than murder in those days.

Jasper Morton had chuckled fiendishly as he heard the shot and death-cry. He believed that his plans had been successfully carried out. But he became uneasy at the long delay of his acolyte, and gave the signal as stated. No answer coming, he began to suspect the truth, and mustering his men, was now approaching the dark and silent building.

"When you are sure of your aim, Jack," muttered Colton, "tell me."

"I'm ready now."

"Then—fire!"

Two whiplike reports rung out upon the clear night air, sounding almost like one. Two of the Night Hawks fell to the ground, writhing in their death-agonies. Wild cries broke from the survivors, and with one accord they broke and fled, seeking the nearest cover, for the moment completely demoralized.

The brothers laughed, and quietly reloaded their weapons. But Mary seemed greatly agitated. As Henry noted her pale and frightened face, she murmured:

"What if they fire the house?"

"My God! I did not think of that!" gasped Colton.

CHAPTER III.

THE MIDNIGHT CONFLICT.

A STRANGE fear filled the breast of the young hunter, Nimble Ned, as he dashed away over the prairie, his eyes riveted upon the point where he had last seen his friend in hot pursuit of the weird rider. And yet, had he attempted he could not have given expression to this dread in words.

Something seemed to tell him that Fred Hawksley was running blindfold into a deadly peril—the more to be dreaded because unknown.

That mysterious Girl Rider was acting the part of a decoy.

All the rumors that he had ever heard of her now flashed across his mind. Until this night he had treated them with contempt, believing them mere fabrications, or else finding birth in a superstitious imagination.

Aside from his personal friendship for Fred, another inducement spurred Ned on. Rumor had it that the handsome hunter had surrendered his heart to fair Fannie Hawksley, Fred's sister, and for once the owner was correct.

When they set forth upon their hunt, Fannie laughingly bade him take good care of Fred, though there was an undercurrent of seriousness in her tones that Ned understood. He knew that Hawksley was rash and adventurous, even to foolhardiness when his blood was fairly aroused, and he had promised her to take care that he returned all right.

A sudden cry broke from Ned's lips, and he cast a rapid glance around. He saw that the moonlight had deceived him—that he was at least a mile further west than he had believed. All was plain to him now—the mystery was a mystery no longer.

"The *barranca*—they are there—it must be so! But how—my God! can that girl have been a *spirit*?"

The ranger reeled in his saddle. The strange events of that night had unmanned him, and wild fancies took possession of his brain. He half believed that this Girl Rider was nothing but a delusion—a phantom who had lured his young friend on to his death, by a fall down the *barranca* that, though still invisible, he well knew lay before him at only a few yards' distance.

His mind a strange medley, Ned urged his horse forward, and in half a dozen more bounds stood upon the verge of the *barranca*; a deep, narrow ravine, with almost perpendicular sides, the bottom thickly strewn with jagged boulders of different sizes.

He peered down into the darkness, his horse slowly trotting along the escarpment toward the north.

Suddenly Ned gave vent to a cry. Close before him seemed a narrow pathway leading down into the ravine.

He urged his horse forward, and descended below the level of the prairie. But a very few moments convinced him that even if he could descend to the bottom, he could do little good without lights, and turning, he scrambled once more to the level ground.

He saw that his comrades had come up, and were now standing as if amazed. His was the figure that drew the cry of astonishment from Craig Fenton.

"Quick, boys," cried Ned, riding toward them, "dismount and get something for torches. They must be down there—but whether dead or alive, God only knows!"

"You think that she—" began Fenton, in a low, hushed voice.

"I don't know—I am afraid to think. But don't talk—make haste. We must search the ravine."

The woods were near, and the young hunters well knew what to select for torches. In a few

minutes they were back to the edge of the *barranca*, where Ned had already kindled a light with his flint and steel.

Bearing the feebly flickering torches, the party descended into the *barranca* by the path that, though rough, was amply wide. They slowly advanced along the rough, rock-strewn bottom, holding aloft their torches, expecting with each movement to come upon the dead and mangled form of their young friend.

The flaring lights caused the shadows to dance and move weirdly, and a dozen times in as many minutes, their hearts were set in a wild, sickening shudder as one of their number believed he beheld the object of their quest. But as often the mistake was proved.

The search was continued in silence. None cared to speak. The same superstitious feeling was upon all. All in all, the night was one not soon to be forgotten.

They had carefully searched the *barranca* upon both sides of the spot for which the trail had pointed, and yet nothing was discovered. They interchanged glances. Could it be that the chase had turned and skirted the ravine?

Ned then said:

"Give him a salute. He may be in here, hunting for the girl, if she hid from him. It can do no harm, and may do good. If alive and within hearing, Fred'll answer."

The rifles were discharged, one quickly succeeding the other, and then all listened breathlessly. Minute after minute passed by, without any reply. Campbell drew a long breath.

"Well, let's go. If he is in here, he will not mind a little delay—for he must be dead!"

Slowly the little party retraced their steps and emerged from the *barranca*. Mounting their horses they rode slowly off along the edge of the flinty ground, scattered at regular intervals from that to the trees, in order that, should one overlook the trail, another might find it.

"Ha! listen—you hear that?"

Ned's voice trembled with excitement.

Two muffled reports came roaring over the prairie, unmistakably that of firearms. All heard them, and for a moment believed that it was Hawksley signaling to them. But then Ruel—the keenest ear, by far, among them, cried:

"Ef it's Fred, he's at Colton's. Them shots kem from thar."

"He'd hardly have gone there—and if he did, why would he fire?"

"He wouldn't—'tain't him. Boys, you hear me; thar's trouble thar!" muttered Ruel, as several more reports—sounding confused as though fired in an irregular volley—came faintly to their ears.

"That's so—ride now, boys; never mind the horses. There's more at stake than their lives!" gritted Campbell, for the moment forgetting the strange disappearance of his friend, in the knowledge that others were threatened.

"Ha—look!"

Ned it was that spoke, but the gesture of his outstretched hand was unheeded. All eyes beheld the same object, and easily interpreted its meaning.

Sweeping round a timber island, a thrilling sight burst upon their gaze. A bright glare

was rapidly ascending to the heavens, spreading and growing more and more vivid with each moment. Once glance told them the meaning of this. A house was burning—the house of their friend and neighbor, Henry Colton!

That this was the result of no accident, was equally plain, for again there broke forth the significant crash of firearms. It meant murder and rapine.

"We must make it, boys, whether it kills the horses or not!" gritted Ned. "One more dash, and we'll do—now!"

With the words, spurs were plunged rowel deep into the already deeply-scored sides of the tortured beasts, and with wild snorts of pain and terror, they dashed madly toward the brilliant light. Holding their breaths, the young hunters handled their weapons and prepared for the result. The half-mile was lessened to one-half, that to a third, and still the animals thundered on.

A stumble—an almost human groan of agony, and one horse is down, the hot life-blood spurt-ing from his mouth and nostrils. It is that of Ruel. The tall hunter was prepared for this. He felt the noble brute's sides collapse, and with a nimble spring, alighted softly upon his feet.

"Good—hurry up, Ruel," cried Ned, who had witnessed the act.

"Bet ye—I'll be thar!" and the hunter bounded forward like a deer.

It may seem strange that the Night Hawks take no alarm at this approach, but they did not. The prairie grass was thick, the turf moist and springy; the burning building roared and cracked loudly, and they were all intent upon watching the doors, knowing that the inmates must soon emerge or else die a horrible death in the flames.

They had not long to wait. Those within were not men to die tamely, while a chance remained to deal a blow at their enemy. To stay within was certain death. To come out seemed equally hopeless, yet they chose this alternative.

The front door was flung wide and two forms sprung out into the open air, with cocked and leveled rifles. A rattling volley was fired at them, but their movements were so quick, their change of position so abrupt, that most of the missiles went wide of the mark.

One fell to his knees—it was Henry Colton. A wild shriek was added to the tumult, and Mary, his wife, who had been forced to remain behind while the men drew the fire of the Night Hawk, sprung out, her little boy clasped to her breast, and flung herself beside the wounded settler.

Colton seemed invigorated by her presence and once more sprung erect, his rifle echoing the death-knell of an outlaw. Then a wild cry broke from his lips as he sunk back. He caught sight of the rescuers.

A hoarse cheer—a deadly volley—then the young hunters sprung from their trembling animals, and with drawn pistols, rushed to close quarters. But the Night Hawks did not tarry to test their metal.

As a band they were annihilated. Two-thirds of their number had fallen, what with the fire of the besieged and this withering vol-

ley, discharged as they all rushed forward to complete their murderous work. With cries of terror the survivors turned and fled for their horses, followed by a rapid discharge of pistol-bullets.

Jack Colton had escaped the storm of bullets that saluted their bold dash from the blazing building, and recognizing his now deadly enemy, Jasper Morton, the Night-Hawk chief, had fired at him. The outlaw staggered, but did not fall, and he was one of the few that gained their horses.

With a curse of rage Colton dashed aside his useless rifle and sprung after Morton. There was reason in his action, for he knew that his life would be in peril as long as the outlaw lived.

Twice he fired, but without apparent effect. The Night-Hawk leader sprung into a saddle, then urged his horse to rapid flight. Colton promptly imitated his action, and the two, pursued and pursuer, soon disappeared without the line of light shed by the blazing dwelling.

"Look to these devils, Ruel," hurriedly uttered Ned, as he looked around upon the scene. "If any are living, bind them. We'll have a hanging-bee here to-morrow!"

"Oh, Ned!" sobbed Mrs. Colton, "come to Henry—quick! He's dying!"

"No—he's only hurt a little, not much. He'll be all right in a minute or two," soothingly uttered Ned, though far from being so confident in his heart. "How is it, Colton, old fellow?"

The settler smiled faintly, then murmured his wife's name. She was beside him in a moment, and then, with her hand clasped in his, he swooned.

"Now, Mary," uttered Ned, as firmly as he could, "be strong—nerve yourself, for on you may depend Henry's life. If you take on this way, it'll kill him sure!"

"I will—I'll be calm. But is there hope—he is not dead?"

"Pooh! far from it. You'll not be a widow for many a long year yet, my dear sister. It's only loss of blood, with the excitement, you see."

While he spoke, Ned was carefully examining Colton's wound, and to his great joy, found that he had told the truth unknowingly. Only one bullet had struck him, severing a minor artery in the left thigh, causing a profuse flow of blood, but nothing that rest and quiet would not cure.

"What d' y' think, Ned?" muttered Ruel, his face black with suppressed anger. "What d' y' think themimps hev done?"

"What?" demanded Ned, alarmed.

"Shot them dorgs! Every one—dead es a nit!"

"Is that all? You startled me half to death!"

"All—all? Them dorgs—the best in Texas—truer'n death—oh, thunder!" spluttered Ruel.

"Never mind 'em. Are there any horses around besides ours?"

"Yes, them what was rid by those car'on."

"The boys must ride further then. We must rouse the neighbors. Colton and his wife need care, and then we must hunt down the villains

that escaped. Besides, there's Fred—he must be found."

With a grieved look at the carcasses of his favorite "dorgs," Ruel strode off to set the hunters at work. An hour later, the wounded man and his wife were on the way to shelter, and Ruel was leading the hunt after those who had killed his dogs.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BARRANCA MYSTERY.

It was a bitter blow to the Night-Hawk leader, Jasper Morton, to see his long-worked-for revenge thus snatched from his very grasp, just as the game seemed entirely in his own hands. Long-worked-for, we say, for the reader must have seen that his was no common enmity toward the two brothers; why, may be explained hereafter.

Morton recognized the rescuing party, and knew that all was lost. Few among that picked band but would have been a good match for him single-handed, even before he received the wound that well-nigh disabled his left shoulder.

With a bitter curse at his ill-luck, the outlaw sprung upon his horse, and plunging spurs viciously into its ribs, dashed off in rapid flight. Three others imitated his example; either from chance or a hope that the young hunters would not separate, each outlaw chose a separate course, riding for dear life.

As we have seen, Jack Colton marked his enemy, and followed in hot pursuit upon one of the horses that the Night Hawks had left fastened to the rail fence in the rear of the stables. Then began another mad, headlong race, the third one that had crossed the prairie that night.

The moon still shone brightly, and Colton could plainly distinguish his quarry, save when a ridge intervened for a moment. The distance separating them was not more than two hundred yards, at the most, and to his fierce joy Colton saw that this was gradually being lessened, and while urging on his excited horse, he assured himself that his pistols were in readiness for use.

"Stop! Jasper Morton—coward!" he cried, in a voice that trembled with rage and hatred. "Stop and prove your manhood—it is only one man that chases you."

The Night Hawk turned and glanced over his shoulder, but instead of checking his madly racing steed, he bent lower in the saddle and urged him to a greater speed. Colton fairly howled aloud in his rage as he saw the outlaw slowly but surely creeping away from him, and drawing a knife, he thrust its keen point several times into the hips of his horse.

Snorting wildly, the tortured brute sprung forward with a speed that seemed to rival that of the lightning's bolt, and Colton laughed aloud as he raised his revolver. Another score moments and he felt that he would be within range.

Then his pistol cracked, deliberately, at regular intervals. His nerves were like iron now, and he felt that revenge was his at last.

But the moonlight was deceitful, the motion of his horse unsteady, and the bullets hissed

harmlessly by the fugitive. A bitter curse broke from his lips as he emptied the first revolver.

Thrusting it into his belt, he again made use of the cruel spur. With wild, killing bounds, the tortured animal brought his merciless rider near the foe.

Again Colton leveled a pistol—his second revolver. At its sharp report, the horse bestrode by the Night-Hawk leader gave a sudden bound, that told the bullet had found its mark.

The pursuer laughed aloud, and leveled his weapon once more. The pursued uttered a fierce, despairing curse, and, turning in his saddle, fired three shots in quick succession at his relentless pursuer.

Fortune favored him in the result, for though scarcely pausing for aim, one missile foiled Colton's hopes. With a shrill shriek of pain, the noble brute stumbled and fell, casting the settler headlong to the ground. A bullet had struck its foreleg, that, already overtaken, gave way, causing the heavy fall.

Morton heard the fall, and glancing back, uttered an exultant laugh. For a moment he pressed hard upon the bit, as though he would return to contemplate his triumph, but then, altering his mind, he spurred on.

He was well-nigh disabled, and did not know how many or close were his pursuers. He was in no condition for a fight just then. His wound, freely bleeding, already caused him to feel faint, his head beginning to swim dizzily.

Added to this, he felt his horse weaken and act as though falling. For a moment he wondered at this, for it was his own animal, a proved good one, but then he divined the cause. One or more of the settler's bullets had found their mark.

With hard-drawn breath and gritting teeth the outlaw glanced over his shoulder. To his joy the prairie was clear of pursuers. Then Colton had been alone!

The horse twitched his tail, and his ears dropped. Morton knew what these symptoms meant, and he prepared for the result. Drawing hard upon the reins, he slackened his speed. It was time. The poor brute was trembling convulsively, the blood oozing from its nostrils and hanging lip.

Morton sprung to the ground, with a fierce curse. The horse staggered when relieved from his weight and gave a faint whicker as it turned its head toward its master. But that was all. With an almost human groan it fell forward, dead.

"Curse the luck!" snarled Morton, wincing with pain as he moved his left arm. "Just now when I most need him—wounded, too! Them devils will be upon my track by daylight—and where can I go? In the motte? They'd unearth me there. Ha! I have it—I can hide in the *barranca*—at least until I can pick up strength to go further. There's a thousand holes among the rocks that I can hide in; unless they try hounds," and he started at the thought, for he knew that in such a case, he was indeed lost.

Still Morton knew that the *barranca* afforded him the best chance of eluding the search that he knew would be made for him, if only by Jack Colton, as the rocks would leave no sign for hu-

man eyes to trace him out by. His horse had carried him to within half a mile of the ravine, and though feeling weak and faint, he set out at his best pace for the refuge, not daring to stop even long enough to dress his wound.

He little dreamed of the adventure that was to befall him there, else he might have hesitated before choosing the *barranca* in preference to the woods.

A few minutes carried the Night-Hawk chief to the edge of the *barranca*, and then he hastened along the verge, seeking for a spot down which he might clamber without too severely exerting his wounded arm. A mutter of satisfaction greeted his success, and Morton cautiously groped his way along a winding trail that evidently led down to the bottom.

He, even then, noticed that his trail had been used, but that gave him no uneasiness. So too had a score of paths at as many different points, by both human and beast.

The trail led him toward the southern extremity of the *barranca*, and on reaching the bottom, he naturally continued on in that direction. For some time he sought among the huge, thick-lying boulders for a snug covert, without finding any that satisfied him.

Before him loomed up the rocky barricade that had checked the progress of the young hunters while engaged in their search for Fred Hawksley, earlier on that same night. Morton, however, had reached the opposite side, facing the north, instead of south.

Among this pile of boulders Morton hoped to find a secure refuge, and had almost gained its foot when a low cry broke from his lips, and he abruptly paused, crouching down to the ground, one hand clutching a revolver-butt. A strange object had caught his gaze—doubly strange in that place.

"Was it only fancy?" he muttered, peering curiously forward. "I don't see it now—it's gone! And yet I don't think it was a firefly. Ha!"

While muttering these words the outlaw slowly rose erect until he assumed his former position. The exclamation told that he had again caught sight of the object.

This was a small point of light, clear and brilliant, glowing steadily and unchangeably. As he slowly raised his head, Morton saw that this only shone from a small aperture, for beyond a certain point, in either direction, it was invisible.

For a time the Night-Hawk chief forgot his bodily pain and exhaustion in wonder. There was something strange in this light, shining from that lone and wild spot, and he resolved to investigate.

Keeping his eye riveted upon the star-like point, he slowly and cautiously advanced, with almost every step losing sight of the light, but then recovering it again. In this manner he gained the lower boulders, and it seemed now that he could reach the light by simply outstretching his hand. Instinctively he raised an arm, then laughed faintly at his own credulity.

Cautiously Morton climbed further among the rocks, his eyes still fixed upon the light. A fragment crumbled beneath his hand, and he

fell forward, striking his head with violence upon a rock.

The shock and pain wrung a slight cry from his lips, and the pistol slipped from his grasp, clattering sharply upon the stones, fortunately not exploding. Quickly recovering himself, Morton glanced forward; but the light was gone!

The blow upon the head confused him, or he might easily have avoided what followed. Instead of retreating or concealing himself, as prudence would have dictated, he remained perched upon the boulders, endeavoring to discover the light.

A faint metallic clink caught his ear, and quickly following the sound, his eyes seemed to outline, though dimly and indistinct, the figure of a human being among the rocks. Only the one brief glimpse was afforded him, for a blinding flash filled his eyes—a stinging pain shot through his brain, and with a wild cry he flung aloft his arms, falling backward to the ground.

When he recovered consciousness, the outlaw captain found himself lying upon a soft couch, evidently formed of skins, for his hand clutched some hairy substance. A heavy throbbing pain filled his brain, and his wounded shoulder ached horribly.

With a half-conscious groan he raised a hand to his head. It touched a sticky substance that he knew was clotted gore. Then it was not all fancy—there had been a human form standing before him, and the blinding blaze came from a pistol or rifle that had wounded him.

"So you have come to," uttered a deep voice, coming from above or behind Morton's head.

He started to a sitting posture, and uttered a cry of terror as his hand sought his belt, only to find it weaponless. A low, taunting laugh followed this movement, then the voice added, as footsteps moved toward the outlaw:

"You need have no fear, my dear sir; you are safe here for the present, at least."

Morton turned his head, and by the dim light saw a tall figure standing beside him—the figure of an old man with close-cropped hair and smooth-shaven face. As he gazed, he knew that this was the man who had fired the shot that wounded him, while searching for the mystic light.

"Who are you—where am I?" he faltered, shrinking back from the stranger.

"You are here—I am myself. That is all you need know for a while. If you prove the man I fancy, I may tell you more. But in the mean time, lie still. Your wounds need dressing, and I now have time to attend to them. Since you came I've been busy watching the movements of some of your friends—a very particular one, I judge, from a few words I heard him mutter," and the tall man gazed keenly at the wounded outlaw.

"Who do you mean? I don't understand you," he muttered, tremblingly.

"It was Jack Colton, I think," slowly added the man.

Morton shrunk back in terror. He was totally unmanned now, and heard the name with a shudder.

"He—you won't let him—"

"No. He is gone; but he must have fol-

lowed you close. I thought you were good friends."

"How—you know me?" gasped Morton.

The strange man laughed.

"There are few persons in this region that I do not know. You go by the name of Jasper Morton. But I don't think that is your real name. If it is, so much the worse for you. You will never leave this place alive."

"Mercy—what harm have I ever done you? Why should you threaten me this way?"

"No particular harm, but you have my secret. That is reason enough. You may judge whether I am a man to balk at trifles, by my having shot you as you were spying into my affairs. I have a secret and an end. That secret must be kept from *all* until my purpose is attained. If you come between, so much the worse for you; you must be disposed of—or, in plainer terms, I shall kill you."

"But if I am not really Jasper Morton?" added the outlaw, anxiously.

"That matters little unless you be one of two persons. Prove to me that you are either of those two, and you are safe."

"And who are they?" quickly asked Morton.

"That *you* must tell me—not I you. But never mind now. I must—"

The strange man abruptly paused in his speech, and the wounded outlaw uttered a gasp of terror. A wild shrill cry—almost a yell, rung clearly upon their ears. It scarcely seemed like the voice of a human being, unless of one hopelessly insane.

The stranger frowned angrily, and a curse broke from his lips. Then he uttered a low, peculiar whistle, twice repeated.

Morton had turned half-round, forgetting his pain in wonder and terror. As the whistle sounded the second time, he saw a dim, shadowy figure glide out from the darkness, and stand before the old man.

Though he could not distinguish the features of this new-comer, Morton knew that she—for it was unmistakably the form of a woman—was young, from the lithe, rounded figure and agile, graceful movements.

The old man spoke a few quick words that the outlaw could not catch, then added aloud as he strode away:

"If he attempts to arise, Lola, shoot him. He must not escape yet."

"I do not fear him. If he is wise, he will lie still."

Morton could scarce believe his ears. The words and voice were in such direct contrast. The one soft and musical as the notes of a bird, the other stern and determined.

Strange events were crowding fast upon him that night, but this was the strangest of them all. Speechless and half-stupefied, he gazed upon the woman before him. Never before had he beheld such marvelous beauty—loveliness of a fiery, yet voluptuous, Oriental type.

She was tall for a woman, several inches above the medium height, in fact, but all was the most perfect symmetry. Her hair, black, glossy and luxuriant, hung in heavy masses below her waist, unconfined save by a simple band of beaded doeskin that crossed above her forehead. Of a dark, Spanish-like complexion, with large,

lustrous eyes, cheeks tinged with the red blush of perfect health; with full, slightly-pouting lips of scarlet, rich, juicy and tempting; rounded chin and graceful neck, sloping down to a bust that Venus herself might have envied; a round, compact waist incased in a neatly-fitting dress of whitely-tanned doeskin; leggings of the same material fitted the round, swelling limbs, ending in dainty, beaded moccasins.

Standing in an attitude of careless ease, the strange beauty was gazing half-mockingly upon the wounded outlaw, one hand clasping the butt of a small, silver-mounted revolver with an ease that bespoke long use and perfect familiarity with the weapon.

"Who are you?" muttered Morton, staring at her as though at a phantom. "I've seen you before—where?"

"I am my father's daughter," and the strange girl laughed clear and musically. "Do you think to gain from my lips knowledge that he refused you? Wait; in good time you shall know all or—nothing."

"You threaten, too? What sort of a hornets' nest is this I've got into, I wonder?"

The strange girl laughed, her eyes and white teeth gleaming from out the dim light. But there was a peculiar expression to her face that sent a thrill through the outlaw's frame. He had seen its counterpart once, as he faced a wounded panther. In this woman's eyes there was the same cruel, deadly glitter that he had noted then.

Morton cast a quick glance around him. The dim light had imperfectly revealed his surroundings; still, he could tell that he was under ground.

The chamber he was in was low and irregular, of no great dimensions, the walls and roof of intermingled earth and rock. Around him hung various weapons, rifles, pistols bows and arrows, Indian tomahawks and knives. Robes and furs were scattered around, or hanging from the walls.

The truth flashes upon him. The light he had discovered came from this chamber, the entrance to which was in some manner concealed beneath or in the rocky barricade that intersected the *barranca*. In falling he had alarmed the inmates. Then the old man must have shot at him, in the treacherous light aiming too high to produce death, though a fraction lower would have ended the outlaw's career forever.

Morton shuddered again, and the girl turned her head quickly, the fire deepening in her eyes, as another cry came from beyond the point where the old man had disappeared. Then a low, gasping, gurgling sound and all was still.

"My God! there's murder going on in there!" cried the outlaw, half-arising, horror expressed in every feature.

"Lie still—move another inch and there'll be murder here as well!" sharply uttered the girl, as the pistol rose to a level with Morton's head. "Down with you, or I fire!"

Morton sunk back, bathed in cold sweat. In a few moments the old man reappeared, wiping his hands upon his dress. The outlaw shuddered convulsively as he noted the dark, red

stains that discolored the skin. What deed of horror had been enacted in that further chamber?

"You can go back to your station now, Lola," he uttered, in a calm, even tone. "If I wish your presence I will signal you. Now, sir," he added, as the woman disappeared from view. "I can attend to you. But first, let's see if there be any need of dressing your wounds. A man at my time of life dislikes unnecessary trouble. As I told you, if you are Jasper Morton, or indeed, any other than one of two persons, there will be no need of dressing your hurts, because, in that case, you must be *disposed of*, before you have a chance to make known what you have discovered concerning this place and its inmates."

"You mean to—to murder me?"

"Exactly—that is the vulgar expression of what I mean."

"Why did you take me in here then?"

"Because—first, you seemed very curious to learn what was going on inside; entirely too curious to suit my ideas of propriety. So I shot you, and I meant to end your prying forever, too. But when I bent over you to see if you were really dead, something in your face struck me, and I fetched you here to see what truth there was in the surmise. Now tell me—are you Jasper Morton; is that your real name?"

"No."

"Good! then what is? Remember that the truth alone can avail you, if anything. Of course you can not guess the names that run in my mind. Speak out—what is your real name?"

Morton's lips parted and his throat twitched, but he could not speak. The knowledge that his own lips might condemn him, was horrible. The resemblance that the old man had been struck with, might after all be mere fancy.

"Spare me—I will take my oath—will be your slave, your dog, if you spare my life," he muttered, great drops of cold perspiration starting out over his forehead.

"I take no man's oath," was the cold reply. "Speak out—or I will believe you lie in saying your true name is not Jasper Morton and reward you with this," and as he spoke, the cold muzzle of a revolver at full-cock touched the outlaw's temple.

"Take it away—I will speak, if you only lower that!" gasped the wounded man, shrinking back.

"Very well. Be quick."

"My name is James—James Mestayer," falteringly.

"You are speaking the truth?" coldly demanded the old man, keenly eying the trembling wretch.

"Yes—the truth, so help me—"

"Never mind. Don't exult too soon. You had a brother?"

"Yes—Thomas. He died—was killed in California."

"What was your father's and your mother's names?"

"James and Lucinda."

"You had an uncle who married a sister to your mother?"

"Yes—father's brother Albert. And you—"

you are the man!" eagerly cried the outlaw. "You are the Barranca Wolf!"

"Yes, I am the Barranca Wolf—Albert Mestayer, your father's brother. In your face I saw what James was when young. That was what stayed my hand. I believed that you was my nephew, either James or Thomas, though I had not seen either for near twenty years. Then you can guess—but no, you were too young then, and I made James promise never to tell you the black story," muttered the old man, half to himself.

The outlaw, Mestayer, as we must now call him—gazed keenly and curiously at this strangely-found relation. He scarce knew what to think. Until now, he believed him dead, for that was what they—himself and brother—had been taught to believe.

"Never mind. We will talk matters over after awhile, when you are stronger. If what I have heard of you is correct, you may be of service to me. But now, let me look to your hurts, and you can tell me how you received the first."

As the Old Wolf's nimble fingers bound up the wounds, the younger Mestayer told the events of that night, as far as he knew them, concealing nothing. He did not not fear his uncle would shrink from crime.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAIDEN'S PERIL.

OVER a week had passed by since the night on which this story opened, a week during which much had been done though little effected. Early in the day following the house-burning, a heavy shower fell that effectually obliterated all trails left by the fleeing Night-Hawks, and also destroyed Ned's hopes of discovering his lost friend with the aid of hounds.

Through that long week he had scarce rested an hour at a time, spurred on by the pleadings of Fred's sister, Fannie Hawksley. He searched every rod of the *barranca*, in company with Ruel and several others of the lost man's comrades, but without finding the slightest trace or clew. They clambered over the rocky barricade, little suspecting the secrets it concealed, or that the old man and his peerless daughter were silently laughing at them for their molelike blindness.

Thoroughly convinced that their friend had not entered the *barranca* at all, the young hunters returned to the level prairie. There a surprise awaited them.

Beyond the *barranca*, a mile distant, they caught sight of a horse feeding upon the juicy grass. One glance sufficed. It was the big yellow horse, Mott, on which Fred Hawksley had set forth in the pursuit of the strange woman. The animal was alone, saddled and bridled. Nothing could be seen of his master.

All was done that human ingenuity could devise, but at the end of the week all was wrapt in darkness. Nothing was learned regarding the young man's fate, nor, during that time, had anything been heard of the strange woman rider. Both had seemingly disappeared together, without leaving any trace.

It was nightfall when a single horseman drew

rein before the dwelling of Archibald Hawksley, dismounted, and, with plump saddle-bags thrown over his arm, approached the front door.

The traveler bore evidence of having ridden many a mile, in the sand and dust that covered his garments, and his heavy horse-hide boots. There was a peculiar air about him that told a settler his occupation. Everything, from the heavy, "black-snake" whip down, stamped him a drover.

Archibald Hawksley, a tall, stalwart man, bearing his years well, warmly greeted the stranger. Five minutes later, the drover was comfortably seated, pipe in mouth, awaiting the evening meal that Fannie was overseeing.

During supper, Fannie several times caught his gaze resting fixedly upon her face, and felt a strange, ill-defined uneasiness that she could not entirely banish. And yet this strange scrutiny might well be pardoned, for the maiden was very pleasing to look upon, and the drover seemed just in the prime of life, when one's fancy is most quickly caught by a fresh, lovely face.

After supper was dispatched, the men stepped inside, and with lighted pipes, continued their bartering. Haley's eyes often wandered toward the house, seemingly admiring its structure, a two-story building being something of a novelty at that time, so far on the frontier.

That evening Ned called, as usual since Fred's disappearance, to report progress. It was the same story of baffled search. Nothing had been learned regarding the missing man.

Mark Haley seemed deeply interested in the story, but could offer no suggestion that had not already been tried. Hawksley sunk into a troubled reverie, and then abruptly retired, first showing Haley his room.

An hour later Ned took his departure, sad and heart-sick. For several months he had been Fannie's accepted suitor, but never until this night had she set the time for their wedding.

"Ned," she had said, looking up into his bold, handsome face, as his arms tightly encircled her lithe, rounded form, "I can not marry until Fred returns home, or—or is found. If alive, bring him here; if dead, bring me proof, and I will be yours."

"If man can do it, Fannie, I will. Good-by, darling. I will not come any more until I can bring you tidings, either good or bad."

"God bless you, Ned," she answered.

Ned dared not reply in words, but their lips met in a long, clinging kiss of pure and holy love, then he tore himself away, and mounting his horse, galloped furiously off toward his own home.

Mechanically Fannie closed and secured the door and windows, then covered up the embers in the fire-place with ashes, and taking a candle, slowly ascended the stairs to her chamber. Though she knew it not, eager eyes were fixed upon her form until the door closed behind her—eyes that burned with an evil glow—the eyes of Mark Haley, the drover.

Nearly two hours passed by after Mark Haley watched Fannie Hawksley to her chamber, before he made a move. Then, with moccasins

upon his feet, instead of the heavy boots, he noiselessly emerged from his room, having in one hand a small bull's-eye lantern, the slide only partially turned. In the other he held a small patch of what looked like solid paper or cloth, and a coil of stout string. The bushy black beard seemed one-sided, as though it was false, and had become slightly disarranged.

The house was still as death. Evidently the inmates were all peacefully slumbering, for a time happily forgetful of their great loss.

Haley smiled viciously, showing the white teeth through the bushy mask of hair. He chuckled, low and exultantly. Thus far his plans had worked admirably. The settler had not suspected him for other than he seemed.

"It works like a charm—had I ordered all things, they could not have turned out better to my mind," he muttered, as his ear was bent close to the door of Fannie's chamber. "She sleeps—I can hear her breathing regularly. If I can only reach her before she awakes. A cry from her lips would fetch that man upon me, and I do not wish to kill him—not yet; a different death than a quick one by a bullet awaits him. A thousand times I could have done that—but my revenge is better, much better."

These last words were hissed forth with a venom indescribable. Though he knew it not, Archibald Hawksley was entertaining his most deadly enemy.

Gently Haley lifted the simple latch, and his eyes snapped exultantly as he found the door yield to his pressure.

Closing the dark-lantern, Haley stealthily entered the chamber, closing the door behind him.

Stealthily, noiselessly, like a serpent of evil, the masked fiend crept toward the bedside, with ready implements that had been provided before entering the house. Fannie breathed on, soft and low, as he noiselessly arose and stood beside her.

Only for a moment did Haley permit himself to gaze upon the picture of peaceful innocence, then he acted. One hand hovered over the maiden's throat, while the other, holding the prepared plaster, clapped it adroitly over her mouth.

The maiden, thus rudely awakened, looked at the intruder with horror-distended eyes, but the cry she strove to utter, died away in her throat. The plaster closed her lips effectually, and the brawny hand tightly clutched her throat. Mark Haley was complete master of the situation.

"Lie still—act wisely and obey, or it will be the worst for you."

Fannie, half strangled, asked the question with her eyes—"What do you mean to do with me?"

"I do not intend to harm you, but you must go with me. As the night is chilly you will need wraps. Promise me not to attempt to remove this plaster, and I will free your hands so that you can slip on your clothes. Refuse, and I take you as you are, in night-dress alone. Quick—decide. I have no time to waste. If you promise, close your eyes."

Fannie read stern determination in her captor's eyes, and making the best of affairs, signed her assent as indicated. Haley laughed.

The villain handed Fannie her garments, and trembling she donned them. Haley thrust her shoes into the pockets of his great-coat.

Scarcely waiting for Fannie to secure her dress, Haley seized her arms and bound them firmly with the string he had provided, then served her ankles the same way.

With knife clinched between his teeth, Haley picked the maiden up in his strong arms and rested her over his shoulder, his arms pinned beneath her. Then he picked up the dark-lantern and stepped out upon the landing.

Opening the slide to throw a faint light before him, Haley began descending the stairs. Twice he paused and listened breathlessly as a stair creaked beneath his foot, but fortune favored him, and he gained the outer door in safety.

While he was undoing bolts and bars, Fannie moved restlessly upon his shoulder. Clutching her tightly he hissed a horrible oath in her ear. With a gasping gurgle, she resigned all hope of being rescued. She dared not give the alarm. She felt that instant death would follow, and, even in this great peril, life seemed very sweet to her.

Stepping outside, Haley gently closed the door behind him, then with a chuckle of fiendish triumph, he glided rapidly away from the house, toward the stable. Pausing outside, he deposited the maiden upon the ground.

Only one obstacle now intervened between him and absolute victory, and he had strong hopes that he might avoid this. As the settler showed him the horses he wished to dispose of, Haley noticed a huge dog—an almost full-blooded mastiff—and learned that to his care was confided the stock at night.

A curse gritted through Haley's teeth, as he saw that only over the dead body of this faithful custodian could he hope to secure his horse. Bending down he caressed the dog, then, like lightning, the heavy knife was brought round, sinking to the very hilt in the dog's side. A half-stifled snarl and the huge brute leaped at the man's throat, bearing him to the ground like a child.

But this was needless. The dog was already dead. His leap had been merely convulsive, and the jaws barely closed upon Haley's throat. The teeth did not raze the skin.

Flinging the body from him, Haley quickly saddled and bridled his horse. Leading him forth, he once more picked up Fannie, mounting with the agility of youth.

"Now, my dear," he muttered, as he carefully removed the plaster from the maiden's lips, "I do this in pure kindness of heart, and I hope for your sake that you will not abuse my confidence. It's not likely that we will meet with any of your friends, but if we do and you should cry out, that cry will be your last. You understand?"

"Where are you taking me? Why have you done this? What have I ever done to you that you treat me so?" faltered Fannie.

"Nothing—but your father has—much. Never mind now. It will be explained to you in due time. Until then, keep still. It will be better for you," was the brutal reply.

Fannie dared not disobey this command, and

relapsed into silence. But with each passing moment her natural self-possession grew stronger, and she began to take note of the direction in which she was being taken. Haley made no attempt to prevent this. He seemed to feel that Fannie was too entirely in his power to make this knowledge dangerous to his plans.

For over an hour Haley galloped steadily on, and Fannie felt her heart sink as she realized that they were now far beyond all habitations of her friends, with nothing but the vast, almost limitless prairie stretching out before them. Where was she being taken? What had fate in store for her?

—Her eyes were closed, her head drooping in despair, when, with a low, fierce curse, Mark Haley suddenly drew rein. With hope thrilling her heart, Fannie eagerly raised her head, and gazed around.

Before them, blocking the very path they had been pursuing, she could just distinguish the forms of three men. Though their features were indistinct, the dress bespoke them white men.

She saw in them a last hope. The threats of Mark Haley were forgotten or disregarded. In a clear, imploring voice she cried out:

"Help—for the love of God, save me!"

With a snarling curse, Haley lifted his clinched fist and drove it forcibly full between her eyes. With a convulsive shudder, Fannie's head drooped, and she lay a lifeless weight upon his arm.

"Hellow! what's the meanin' o' all this, anyhow?" gruffly demanded one of the three men, stepping forward, his rifle-muzzle in advance. "What ye got thar, mister?"

"None of your business. Attend to your own affairs, and don't meddle with mine," boldly replied Haley.

"Eh? Jes' lis'en, boys. Don't he crow loud? Reckon you don't know— Why, hellow! Is 't you, Cap?" and the man lowered his weapon, his face expressing great surprise.

"I don't know you—stand aside, or I'll give you cause to regret interfering with matters that don't concern you," snarled Haley, his revolver coming to a level.

"You will, eh? Is that the way you treat old pards, Jap Morton?" and the rifle was quickly raised to a level.

"Curse you for a meddling rascal!" hissed Mark Haley, and his pistol spoke sharp and clear.

Like an echo the rifle responded. Then came a shrill cry—a heavy groan and dull fall; then more shots, a confused trampling—then all was still.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOST TRAIL.

WITH the dawn of day, Archibald Hawksley emerged from the house, and set about his morning duties. Though he noticed the door was unbarred, he thought Fannie had forgot to secure it.

But he was not long deceived. As he entered the stable, a cry of surprise and rage burst

from his lips. Before him lay the stiff and mangled body of his faithful mastiff.

One glance round the interior told him the stranger's horse was missing, though all the others were safe. Scarcely knowing what to think, he rushed toward the house, where he was met by his wife, pale and agitated.

"Father, where is Fannie?"

Pale and stern, with blazing eyes, the settler dashed up the stairs, and burst open the door of the room assigned to their late guest. It was empty. The bed had not been pressed that night. With a groan of heartfelt despair he sunk into a chair. Though he knew not the cause of its being dealt him, he realized the full force of the blow.

"Father, where is Fannie?" repeated the pale and trembling wife, creeping to his side.

"God only knows, but I will find her. That man—that devil must have stole her. Fool that I was, to let his lying tongue so blind me! But he shall pay for it."

"Oh! Fannie—my child! my poor child!" gasped the bereaved mother, for the first time realizing the full weight of this new blow.

"Peace, Esther," coldly added Hawksley. "We must work. Do you go down and send the children round to the neighbors with the tidings. Bid them come here at once, ready for work. I will take his trail, and you can send them after me as they come in. I will leave plenty of signs so that they can easily overtake me. Be sure and send for Ned. Go now—there is no time to lose. I must look first if he left any clew."

Mrs. Hawksley, her terror and despair momentarily stilled by the stern and peremptory words of her husband, hastened down-stairs to dispatch the children, as directed, for assistance.

He rode out from the yard, and making a broad circuit, quickly struck the trail.

Bending low in the saddle, Hawksley rode on at a rapid gallop, his keen eye, sharpened by a knowledge of his child's peril, picking up the trail unerringly. Straight as the flight of a crow, for miles, led the trace.

Hawksley's brow darkened as he noted this. The abductor seemed striking for the broad, unsettled prairie.

Checking his horses, he bent down and picked up a circular patch of cloth, covered with some sticky substance.

One glance was all that he could give—then he sunk to the ground, bowing his head upon his knees, shuddering convulsively, like one suddenly stricken with a chill. The horrible truth seemed plain to him—he believed that before him lay strewn the remains of Fannie, his child.

The greensward was trampled and torn, stained here and there with crimson blotches. Tattered and torn, he saw a bright, particolored patchwork quilt that he knew had covered his daughter's bed. Further to one side was a fragment of her dress, also bloodstained.

Hawksley remained thus, bowed down in mute agony, until the quickly repeating thuds of horses' hoofs approaching in rapid gallop roused him. Then he clutched his rifle and glared around, his bloodshot eyes blazing with vengeance.

"Hold! Hawksley—don't fire—we're friends," cried a loud, clear voice that he recognized through the blind passion that possessed him.

Slowly he lowered his rifle, passing a hand across his eyes, as though something obstructed his vision. He did not return the salutation, nor speak a word as the two young men rode up, but silently pointed a finger toward the ghastly relics that strewed the sward.

"My God! what is this?" gasped Nimble Ned, reeling in his saddle, shrinking back as a horrible fear struck to his heart.

Zeb Ruel—his companion—did not speak, but dismounted and slowly approached the spot. He examined the blanket, then the fragment of Fannie's dress. There were other pieces of cloth, evidently from garments worn by a man.

Abruptly pausing he poked at some object with the butt of his rifle. Whatever it was seemed wound round a fragment of bone. Stooping, he gingerly freed it with his fingers, then held it aloft, critically eyeing it.

Ned and Hawksley both uttered little cries. They could see that it was a mass of hair, though the dust that covered it disguised the color.

Shaking it gently, Ruel examined it closely. A long, low whistle, expressive of surprise, broke from his lips.

"What is it, Ruel?" faltered Hawksley.

"See! a skelp—no, by thunder! it's a false b'ard!" was the astonished reply.

"Let me see," and Hawksley snatched the article from Zeb's hands. "Yes—it is his! He—Mark Haley wore this, and I—cursed fool that I am!—I thought it natural! Then it is true, as I feared—they are both dead! Fannie, my darling child—oh God!" and sinking to the ground, the stricken father burst into tears.

"Don't bother him, Ned," hastily muttered Ruel, as Campbell sprung from his horse. "It'll be the savin' o' him—them tears. He'd go plum crazy else—an' no wonder, nuther. First Fred, now the gal."

"Then you think—" faltered Ned, chokingly.

"But we don't *know*," was the hasty reply, for Ruel knew in what relation the young couple stood to each other, and dreaded the result. "An' I never give up hope while thar's a chance left. She *may* be rubbed out; I don't say she isn't. But why—who by? Surely the fellow wasn't cussed fool enough to kill her an' then hisself! You see *some one* must 'a' helped—an' that's jest what we must look for now. You must help—you're good on the trail—an' it'll keep you from gittin' as *he* is. Go that way—I'll go this. Look cluss round the aidges o' the trampled spot. Maybe we kin find sunkthin' to pay us."

Separating, the two young men crouched low down, carefully and thoroughly scrutinizing every inch of the ground for several yards beyond the edge of the torn and trampled spot. Their search was successful, for at almost the same moment a cry announced some discovery.

"What is it, Ned?" muttered Ruel, springing to his friend's side.

"Prints of a horse's hoofs at full gallop. See—they toe away, and—look! See the blood-spots!"

"Sure enough—plenty, too. But now the

question is—was thar anybody on him? Right here he looks as if he was runnin' loose-like. But let that rest fer a bit, an' come over an' look at my find. I want your 'pinion on it. Them pesky wolves hes 'most blotted it out."

"It's the print of a man wearing a boot," muttered Ned, after a close scrutiny. "He is leaving this place—on a run. See how the toes cut in!"

"Right—but—"

"With boots on, you say?" interrupted Hawksley, who had risen unobserved.

"Yes, and large ones too."

"Then *he* did not make them, for he left his boots at the house, with his empty saddle-bags, so's to step easy," suggested Ruel.

"Hark! some one is coming."

"Two, rather, from the sound. Yes—see; it's Fenton an' Morley. Jest in time, boys," he added, as the two men rode up to the spot. "We want you, with Hawksley here, to take an' foller up this trail, while Ned an' I look to t'other 'ne. Grupp the feller *alive*, mind ye. Whoever he is, he kin tell all what happened here last night. Think you kin foller it, Morley?"

"Ef any man kin, I kin," quietly replied the little, wizen-featured hunter, throwing his bridle-rein to Fenton.

"If you git him, send up a smoke o' wet grass. We'll see it, an' we'll do the same if we git sure news fu'st."

But little more was said. Hawksley had by this time entirely regained his composure, and, though he firmly believed that his child was dead, he resolved to bear up until he had drank deeply of revenge. He, together with Fenton and Morley, set forward upon the trail, the old hunter tracing it up with the certainty of a bloodhound.

Ned rode his horse, leading that of Ruel, who preferred walking at present, though the trail was plain enough to be followed from the saddle. He was trying to decide whether the madly-fleeing horse was ridden or not; a difficult task at the best, unless by long trailing.

"It's the crittur that is hurt," muttered Zeb, after a while, "an' that too in the head or neck. 'Ca'se why? You see the drops o' blood is mostly scattered in a line, an' on some o' them is scattered dust an' dirt."

Ned abruptly pulled up, and Ruel closely scrutinized the ground for a minute in silence. Then he arose and leaped into the saddle. He had decided that the horse was ridden.

"Now look well to your weepens," he added, as he set forward at a hard gallop. "Thar's a man ahead o' us, an' he was mixed up in the scenes back thar. Whoever he is, we must take him; but don't do no more'n cripple the cuss."

"We're not far from the river, now."

"No. The varmint is makin' straight for it. The fool! A hoss thet hes lost a bushel o' blood like this one hes, hain't got no call tryin' to cross the ford *now*. I only hope he won't drown'd the man, too."

The ford was almost directly opposite the camp, and the trail was running in a bee-line for it.

"I knowed it—see, the tracks lead down into

the water," muttered Zeb, his keen eyes searching the further banks. "Mebbe he crossed, but I reckon he had to swim for it. Over we go—it's the quickest way."

The horses took willingly to the water, and though at one time they were forced to swim desperately in the raging current, their strong limbs prevailed, and the two hunters were soon in safety at the other shore. Zeb Ruel leaped into the shallow water, tossing his reins to Ned.

Then the two men began closely scrutinizing the ground between the river and the timber.

For full half an hour they searched without success. It was evident that the horse had not crossed, and Paul was inclined to believe that the rider had been swept off into the deep water below, when, hampered by his wounded steed, his death would almost inevitably follow.

"Ha! look yonder!" cried Ned, directing his companion's attention over the river to a tall column of dense black smoke.

"It's the boys; they've found somethin' on the other trail. We'd better go back."

As he uttered these words, the tall hunter suddenly paused, and bent his ear to the ground for a moment. Then rising he glided swiftly toward the arch-like opening between the two timber islands; reaching this, he beckoned vehemently for Ned to follow.

"Look yonder!" he hissed, grasping Ned's arm with convulsive force, his other hand outstretched toward the open prairie.

"The strange Girl Rider—the one that decoyed Fred Hawksley from us!" gasped Ned in wonderment.

"It's her—shure! Kin you take her? Your critter's fresh. Ketch her an' you kin tell whar Fred's gone to."

"I'll do it or kill my horse. Stand aside, Ruel," excitedly muttered Ned.

"Easy—she's comin' closter. Look to your girth—see that it don't fail ye now. Ef you cain't do better, drop 'ither her or her critter. Ha! she has caught sight o' you. Durn it! why didn't we hide closter?"

It was true. Upon a ridge scarcely a mile distant was the strange woman, riding the spotted mustang that had served her so well when Fred Hawksley was in pursuit. The sun shining brightly, had outlined the two hunters clearly against the open background, and she had evidently caught sight of them, for she drew rein, gazing in their direction with one hand shading her eyes.

As Ned leaped upon his big bay horse, she wheeled the mustang and dashed back over the swell like an arrow. Touching his mettled horse, fairly warmed to his work by the morning's ride, Ned sped swiftly over the rolling prairie, almost in the same tracks that he had made a week before, when pursuing the same creature. Would this chase end as disastrously? His brow darkened and his teeth gritted fiercely as he resolved to give the race a different termination.

A fierce joy filled the young ranger's heart as the woman rider again appeared in sight, for he could see that already he had lessened the interval between them. Both animals evidently were fresh, and it was to be a test of their superiority—a war of races.

As the woman neared the timber point, she turned her head and glanced back over her shoulder. Ned almost fancied that he could detect her scornful, taunting laugh as she waved a hand toward him, then bending forward, disappeared behind a clump of trees.

"Now I will know—if she is gone, then I have her foul. I'll solve the mystery of Ford's disappearance, and that too before this day's sun sets!" he muttered, as his spurs rankled the big horse's sides.

In a few moments he also rounded the point of trees, and abruptly pulled up his horse, with a low cry. As he suspected, the prairie was open and untenanted. The strange rider had disappeared.

But then as he glanced downward at the tracks of the spotted mustang, Ned saw that they turned abruptly to the right, running close to the underbrush, instead of heading for the *barranca*.

CHAPTER VII.

ON GUARD.

NIMBLE NED sat his horse with an air of irresolution. For a moment he appeared at a loss what course to pursue.

He glanced quickly around him. The black column of smoke had disappeared. Evidently Zeb Ruel had regained the other party.

Ned was in a quandary whether to hasten to join them, to search for Fannie, or to follow up the faint clew that lay before him, which might lead to the discovery of his lost friend and almost brother, Fred Hawksley. With an effort he decided.

"It is what Fannie would wish, did she know it," he muttered, as he shook the reins free. "There are better eyes than mine at work over yonder, and I could do no particular good. She would tell me to hunt for poor Fred."

Ned was following the trail of the spotted mustang, bending low in his saddle, for the ground was rapidly becoming more hard as he advanced, and the small hoofs had not cut deeply into the turf. Though keen-eyed, the young hunter soon found that he must dismount, or run the risk of losing the trail altogether.

Like a well-trained dog, the big bay horse followed him at a little distance. Step by step Ned picked up the trail, that gradually grew fainter and more indistinct.

A strip of flinty ground led from the *barranca* clear to the timber's edge. At the edge of this strip all traces ended.

One glance decided this, and then Ned skirted the further side, until at the underbrush. He saw that a horse could not have forced a passage into the timber without leaving unmistakable traces of so doing. A grim smile lighted up his countenance. He knew now that the *barranca* contained his quarry.

"So much settled," he muttered, triumphantly. "I don't think the time is lost, for now I will have only one side to watch. Come, miss, madam, whichever you may be. I think you will find it harder to pull the wool over my eyes now than last week. It's you and I for it now, and the smartest brain wins."

Signing for his horse to follow him, Ned

looked to his rifle, and glided toward the edge of the *barranca*. He paused upon the edge, and while closely scrutinizing as much of its bottom as possible from his position, he meditated deeply.

"It's plain," he muttered, finally, "she took the piebald with her, else I must have seen its tracks. There are places where a horse can be concealed down there, but not many. Now, shall I go down and hunt her out?"

He soon discovered a path, narrow and steep, yet amply wide enough to permit a sure-footed horse to ascend or descend without much difficulty, leading down to the bottom of the ravine. His keen eye could detect the signs of hoofs having pressed its surface, though how recently could only be surmised.

"It leads in the right direction, too—that is, toward the pile of rocks. Somewhere near that I believe lies the secret. If so, the game's mine."

The young hunter had decided upon his course. Craft and cunning must be his aid now. The stakes played for were far too important to be lost by a rash or premature move.

Motioning his horse to remain stationary, Ned hastened to the timber and soon secured several small leafy branches, and a handful of dried grass. Holding these, he glided cautiously along the escarpment, his eyes closely scanning every foot of the bottom.

He neared the rocky barricade without discovering anything that could possibly afford concealment for a horse, and then, crouching down, he narrowly examined the pile.

Then, with strips cut from his hunting-shirt, he carefully bound the twigs and dried grass upon his head and shoulders, in such a manner that his vision was unobstructed, while concealing his form.

For two hours he lay motionless, patiently watching, only shifting his gaze occasionally up the *barranca*, to make sure that his quarry was not escaping him in that direction. As he cautiously turned his head toward the barricade, after one of these glances, a glow of light filled his eyes, and he started convulsively.

He saw that his surmises were well-founded. Before him stood the woman—the strange rider whom he firmly believed to be a decoy for some deep and subtle purpose.

He had time but for the one glance, for then the vision disappeared like magic. How, was plain. He could still see the dark niche that her form had filled, and he knew that this must be the entrance to some underground retreat.

His resolution was taken in a moment. He forgot his usual prudence, in the thought that the solution of his friend's strange disappearance lay within his grasp. He did not give a thought to the danger he might be running, nor of the force he might encounter in his search for the strange woman.

"Run to earth at last!" he muttered, as he looked to the caps of his revolvers. "You shall not escape me this time. I'll know where Fred is, if I have to force the words from your lips."

Ned critically scanned the side of the *barranca* beneath him. It was precipitous, and yet he did not like to lose the time for going up to the path. So lowering himself by the hands,

he dropped lightly to the rocky ground beneath, accomplishing the feat in safety.

Drawing a revolver, he cautiously neared the rocky pile, his eyes riveted upon the opening in which he had beheld the strange woman. As he peered into the dark hole, for the first time a doubt as to the prudence of his course struck him, and he hesitated, in doubt whether it would not be wise to signal to his friends, knowing that the smoke column would quickly bring some of them to his side.

At that juncture, a slight, rustling sound met his ear, and quick as thought he threw forward his left arm, at the same time raising his pistol. The action was purely instinctive, for he could see nothing, but it probably saved his life.

A crushing blow from some unseen weapon fell upon his fore-arm, hurling it helpless to his side, then all was a blank. The same blow had fallen, though with a broken force, full upon his forehead, felling him senseless to the rocks.

The sight of this strange woman had set Ned's brain on fire, and he acted without the slightest precaution or forethought. Had he but reflected for a moment, he must have known that she had noticed him, recognizing the presence of an enemy, even through the disguising grass and twigs. What else could have caused her sudden retreat? But Ned was too greatly excited to notice this, and he suffered the consequences.

How long he remained insensible he never knew, but it must have been for some time, for, when he awoke, a scene, something similar to that which met the wounded outlaw's astonished gaze greeted his vision. The experience of the two men had been almost exactly similar. Both had narrowly escaped death at the hands of the same being—the old man, Albert Mestayer, the *Barranca* Wolf.

But Ned was more fortunate, in that he found his hurts carefully dressed. This was the first point that he noticed on returning to consciousness. The next was, that a thong or cord of some kind held his feet firmly to the rude but comfortable pallet upon which he lay.

"Father, he has awakened," uttered a low, soft voice from close to his head, and Ned heard a faint rustle there.

The voice thrilled through his brain like liquid music. Never before had he heard tones so sweet and melodious. In wonder at it, he forgot his pain, his perilous situation—everything but the voice.

A light step echoed through the rock-bound chamber, and a tall form came and stood over him, with folded arms, gazing down upon his countenance with vividly glowing eyes. It was the man who had called himself Albert Mestayer, but Ned could not remember having ever met him before.

"You are right, Lola. Go, now. I wish to be alone with this man for a time."

A light, graceful form glided past him, and paused within range of Ned's vision, her eyes resting softly upon his face. A light of pity seemed to beam from their liquid depths, as she uttered:

"You will not—not harm him, father?"

"Go! it is not your place to question me. You forget yourself, child," sternly replied Mestayer, his brow contracting.

With another glance at the bewildered hunter, Lola disappeared from view. Then the eyes of the two men met fully, and Ned read in those of the tall man a depth of hatred that for a moment chilled his blood. But then his courage returned, and he was once more himself, cool and collected.

"Well, sir, will you tell me what this treatment means, if, as I suppose, you are the one who struck me in the dark?"

"And may I ask why were you prowling round my home with drawn revolver?" retorted Mestayer.

"I was seeking for a friend, and had reason to believe that he was detained here by force."

"Whom do you allude to?"

"Fred Hawksley. He followed your—that woman here, a week ago, and has not been seen or heard of since."

"How do you know that he came here?"

"I was with the party that followed him and her. We saw by the trail that he came here."

"Well, there is no need of keeping the truth from you, for I don't think you will ever betray me—for a very good reason. He did come here—in much the same manner that you did. But he is not here now," and the human wolf laughed diabolically.

"You did not murder him?" faltered Ned.

"Never mind. You had far better be thinking of your own self. It may be beyond your power to do so ere long," he snarled.

"Threatened men live long. But tell me: where is Fannie Hawksley?" suddenly added the young hunter.

"What is she to you that you take such an interest in her?"

"She is my promised wife."

"Prepare yourself, my poor friend, for some affecting news," he added, mockingly. "Your true love is no more. However, you have one consolation. You will not be long separated from her."

"Bah! I know you are lying—I can see it in your eyes," scornfully retorted the young hunter.

The Barranca Wolf started, and his face flushed darkly, his eyes blazing with anger. His clinched fist uprose as if to deal a crushing blow upon the pale but undaunted face of the hunter, when a lithe form sprang forward and caught his arm. It was Lola.

"Father, think what you do! Strike a bound and helpless man! For shame!"

Evidently brutal and fierce, he hurled the maiden across the chamber with a bitter curse.

For a moment Ned thought he meant to slay her, but then with an effort, Mestayer calmed his passion, saying in a stern tone:

"Go now, and see that you keep your station. No more eavesdropping, or it will be the worse for you. Stay—I forgot. Remain here and keep guard over this man until I return. It is time James was going."

Lola returned and sunk down beside the couch where lay the young hunter. His gaze followed her motions, and then their eyes met; but only for a moment. Then Lola's eyes

drooped, a burning blush suffusing her rich complexion. Very different was her appearance then from what it had been when confronting James Mestayer, under somewhat similar circumstances.

In point of fact she was in greater peril at that moment than Ned himself. The face of the handsome hunter had made a deep impression upon her heart, and for the first time in her life Lola began to realize the meaning of the term love.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT BAY.

WHEN he left Nimble Ned, the Barranca Wolf entered the first chamber of the cell where we, a week previous to this date, found him bending over the wounded leader of the Night Hawks. Here that worthy, now recognized as a nephew of the old man, was idly lolling upon a pallet of skins, his wounds almost entirely cured.

He raised himself to a sitting posture as the old man entered, casting at him a quick, inquiring glance. Evidently the leader of the Night Hawks regarded his newly-found relative with considerable respect.

"Well?" he added, as the old man approached.

"It is well, so far, but we must work to keep it so. This young fellow tracked us home, and his are not the sharpest ears on the border. Hawksley is out with the settlers. They may find this place at any hour, and then, though I could make a good fight first, my revenge would be cut short by death. The time has come for you to play your part. I need your help now, because I cannot leave Lola here alone. Are you ready to keep your oath?"

"Yes. Tell me what I am to do, and I will not fail for lack of trying," was the prompt reply.

"Well, you must go from here to the Kiowa chief Chigilli, as speedily as possible. Tell him that the time has come when he can strike the blow. See—Chigilli gave this to me. It is his totem; this border is made from sacred wampum. Give this to him, and bid him to follow you. Lead him and his band here. When you come I will have all in readiness for the blow. You shall have Mary Colton—though she is one of the accursed, I spare her life, because I know that as *your* slave, her life will be worse than death."

"You are complimentary," muttered the outlaw in a slightly bitter tone.

"I speak the truth. But let that pass. You must go now. You have not forgotten any of my instructions? You remember the rendezvous?"

"I forget nothing. But how am I to go? On your horse?"

"No. I may have use for him. But our young friend left his horse staked upon the prairie above. Take it—that will be the easiest way to dispose of it to keep it from telling troublesome tales. Ride out from the *barranca* until you strike ground that will take and hold a trail, then round the head of the ravine. After that do not spare the brute. Horse-flesh is

cheap, and Chigilli will furnish you with a remount."

"But why—"

"For this reason. If Nimble Ned is missed—which of course will be the case—search will be made for him. His horse's trail will be struck here. As it leads, so will they follow, and play into our hands by meeting you half-way. In that case, you know what to do. The Kiowas are eager for scalps. Let them take all they can—only tell Chigilli that he must bring me Hawksley, a prisoner. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now go and ride for life. By night-fall you can reach the rendezvous—by day-dawn you should be well on your road back here."

But few more words were spoken, and James Mestayer left the human wolf's retreat, and, after first cautiously scouting the surrounding prairie, dragged himself over the escarpment. After some little trouble, he secured the suspicious horse, and literally obeying the old man's instructions, soon rounded the *barranca's* head, then galloping swiftly away toward the west.

As the sun set, Mestayer caught sight of the hill-range in which he knew the Kiowa chief was awaiting a message from the old man, his "white father."

At a glance the outlaw recognized the landmarks given him by his uncle, and he knew that his course had been shaped aright. Raising a hand to his mouth, he uttered a long-drawn, vibrating cry—the shrill view-hallo of the Kiowas. A few moments later there came to his ears a similar cry, only more perfectly modulated, and then a single horseman rode forth from a rocky defile that partly intersected the hills.

"Who are you that sound the Kiowa cry, yet wear the skin of a pale-face?" demanded Chigilli, in slightly accented English, his half-breed mother having taught him his father's tongue.

For answer Mestayer produced the slip of wampum-enriched deerskin, and handed it to the chief. Chigilli's stern countenance instantly relaxed, and he henceforth treated the outlaw with the greatest deference and courtesy. Mestayer quickly made known the purport of his visit, and delivered, word for word, his uncle's message.

Half an hour later the chief led the twenty warriors out from the rocky defile. Behind him, upon the broad, smooth surface of a rock, were depicted sundry rude signs and symbols, drawn with a finger-point covered with dampened powder. These were directions for the guidance of the buffalo-hunters, bidding them hasten after.

Mestayer found that he would not be able to regain the *barranca* retreat by daybreak, for the east was showing light streaks when there remained still a dozen or more miles to be covered. Then came an interruption, before another mile was traversed.

Events had occurred much as the old man, Albert Mestayer, had foreseen. Zeb Ruel had rejoined the other party of trail-hunters, informing them of where and how he left Nimble Ned. In due course of time the young man was

missed, searched for, and the trail found. They followed it after the outlaws had taken it up, round the *barranca*, and out into the prairie. As night fell they went into camp, when they were joined by others of the settlers who had turned out to take part in the hunt.

It may be as well to state here the cause of the smoke-signal having been made. Following the trail of the men on foot, the party had been considerably delayed by Hawksley's having a fit of apoplexy, in consequence of his deep emotions. As soon as his senses returned, he urged them to lose no time, but to keep on the trail, and when his strength returned, he would follow on after them. They did so, the trail ending at last in their finding the senseless body of a white man, whom they naturally took to be the abductor of Fannie. For this reason they sent up the smoke. Noticing the signal, Hawksley managed to mount his horse and ride to the spot. His disappointment at seeing a stranger was great, and brought on another and more severe fit. While it lasted, and while the attention of all was directed toward him, the outlaw breathed his last. This was the state of affairs when Zeb Ruel came in and told his story. After some discussion, it was decided to go back and take up Ned's trail, in hopes that, should he capture the strange rider, the mystery might be elucidated.

This party it was that now confronted the Kiowas under guidance of the ex-captain of Night Hawks. Mestayer was by no means pleased at the meeting, for he saw that the settlers were nearly equal in numbers to the Kiowas, and he also knew that they were much better armed, each man bearing a rifle and at least one revolver, more generally two of these terrible weapons.

As the Kiowas were nominally at peace with the whites, a collision might and probably would have been avoided, only for one thing. Jack Colton was among the trail-hunters, and he recognized the would-be murderer of his brother.

With a wild cry he plunged spurs rowel-deep into his horse's flanks and sprung forward, leveling his rifle as he did so. It cracked—one of the savages riding close behind Mestayer, uttered a shrill death-yell, and fell to the ground, dead.

That put an end to all doubt. Sounding his war-cry, Chigilli led the charge, and the next moment the two bodies mingled together. For several minutes the conflict raged with deadly ferocity, but the superior weapons of the settlers quickly turned the tide in their favor.

Jack Colton had singled out the outlaw guide, and nothing loth, Mestayer gratified his desire, though still feeling the effects of his wounds. Their horses came violently together just as their pistols spoke for the first time.

Rearing, Colton's horse received the bullet between his eyes and fell, hurling Colton violently to the ground, where he lay, stunned for the moment. Mestayer discharged a second shot at him, but with unsteady aim, and a slight flesh wound was the only result; then he was forced to turn his attention to other foemen.

Chigilli gave the signal to retreat, seeing that he was overmatched. The hills were near at

hand, and for them their horses' heads were turned, in full flight.

So sudden was this movement that the settlers did not comprehend its meaning until the Kiowas had gained full two-score yards the start. But then they dashed on in hot pursuit.

They realized their error and strove to remedy it, but too late. The Kiowas had gained too many yards to be overtaken, and the cunning Chigilli well knew what he was about. He was rushing for a point from which his force could easily hold the settlers in check, or at least inflict fearful slaughter in case they should try a desperate charge first.

Zeb Ruel divined their purpose first, and kept the settlers from going too far. He knew a plan worth two of that, and as the Kiowas disappeared in a narrow, defile-like cleft, the settlers drew rein.

"Quick—Fenton, you an' Morley come 'th me," he cried, eagerly. "Rest o' you stay here an' keep the imps back ef they try to run out. We'll fix 'em—hurry."

As he spoke he turned his horse's head to one side and dashed rapidly up the hill's base, here steep and rugged. Though not exactly comprehending his purpose, the two men designated by name followed him without hesitation.

Dismounting, they clambered rapidly up the hill, soon gaining the top. An exultant shout broke from Ruel's lips as he saw that he was in time. If indeed the Kiowas contemplated escape by such means, they would find their path a gantlet of death.

The defile alluded to ended in a steep hill, up which a horse could climb, though with difficulty. This once surmounted, a broad, gentle slope led down to the prairie beyond. Ruel's position commanded this ascent, and was within easy pistol-range.

"Good! we've got 'em in a hole, now!" he chuckled, breathing hard with fatigue. "We kin make things hot for 'em, I reckon!"

But though he suspected it not, he was even then, in a measure, being outwitted. Chigilli had no intention of fleeing further. With his men dismounted and well covered, he felt able to beat back the settlers should they attack him, until help should arrive, and not a score seconds before Ruel reached his station, a Kiowa crossed the ridge, sent to hurry up the other band.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

THE hours dragged by drearily enough with Nimble Ned, though for a part of the time he had the beautiful Lola for a guard. But after the first flush of surprise, Ned gave her little attention. His mind was filled with thoughts of his lost love, Fannie Hawksley, whom the old man, his captor, declared was dead. Though the young hunter tried to believe this a falsehood, his success was only partial.

Ned was aroused from one of these fits of gloomy despondency by a low, taunting laugh, sounding from close beside him, and hastily glancing up, he perceived that the old man had taken Lola's position. The almost diabolical expression of triumph that rested upon his face startled the young hunter, and he resolved to give his enemy no more such gleeful moments.

"Who are you that my misery should give you so much pleasure?" he demanded, with ill-concealed curiosity.

"I promised to tell you—and this is as good a time as any to keep my word," slowly replied the old man, sinking down upon the rude stool that had been so recently occupied by a much more agreeable figure. "You may or you may not remember something of the matter, when I tell you that my name is Albert Mestayer."

As he spoke, his gaze was riveted firmly upon the young man's countenance. Though expressing curiosity, there was no change to indicate that Ned had ever heard of the name before.

"I see you do not know—I might have known that they never would have told you. It is well. You will not be so prejudiced, and will be more likely to do me justice. Now listen well, and you will see why I hate your family and that of Hawksley."

"We three were close neighbors living then in the southern part of Illinois. Almost from childhood we had been playmates and bosom friends. And such we might have remained to this day, only for the treachery of one—of Christopher Hawksley, the brother of Archibald."

"We three men married, but he—Chris—was single. Though living with his brother, he was quite as much at home while at your father's house or at mine. Indeed the gossips began to whisper that he was more so, and to point the finger of scorn at me."

"For a time I closed my ears to these rumors, but at my heart there gnawed a horrible fear that what I dreaded was but too well founded. He and she had long been intimate, and at one time were reported betrothed, but then a coldness came between them, and she accepted me."

"I spoke to her of the rumors, but she was of a quick, passionate temper, and for the first time since marriage we had hot and angry words together. She refused to answer me, saying that I insulted her by the suspicion. While still angry, I met Christopher Hawksley and forbid him ever entering my house, or addressing my wife at any time or place where they might chance to meet."

"He seemed surprised—I thought then that he looked guilty, and I could scarcely keep my hands from his throat. But I did, and went home with a heart still more bitter and wicked."

"Three days after this, as I returned from the field somewhat earlier than usual, I saw Hawksley parting from my wife at the door. They seemed frightened and confused at my appearance, and I dare say they had cause."

"The next I remember is finding myself standing over his senseless body. But I had beaten him almost to death with my fists."

"Well, the word soon spread that I had brutally murdered the man, and the excitement was great. Hawksley was one of those general favorites, half-fool, half-roogue, who spent his money with a lavish hand, making friends with everybody, while I, naturally reserved, had become morose and unsociable since these sickening rumors began to meet my ear. So you see it took very little to get up a hue and cry against me,

"Arch Hawksley came and removed his brother. That night, though the doctors pronounced Chris in no immediate danger, a mob, led by those who had once been my dearest friends—your father and Arch Hawksley—came and took me from my bed, dragging me out-doors amid curses and threats, some even beating me with clubs and their fists, as I was hauled helplessly along over the rough ground, half-naked, only in my night-clothes.

"Well, you can guess the rest. The favorite punishment of western mobs, when they do not wish to *quite* murder, was given me. I was tarred and feathered!

"After this, they set me free. Half-mad, I plunged into the swampy woods, where I lay until morning. By that time I had in a manner regained my coolness, and had decided upon my course of action. I knew that I had one true friend near, and to his hut I hastened. This was a middle-aged negro, named Sam.

"He removed the tar, and tenderly nursed me through a long and severe illness, brought on by exposure and excitement. During all this he had kept my existence a secret, and all believed that I had thrown myself into the river to hide my shame. Sam also kept close watch upon my house, and when he considered me strong enough, he told me what he had learned.

"My wife took my death very easily, it seemed. Chris Hawksley had been visiting her. That was enough. I swore then that I would have a deep and bitter revenge—that I would devote my entire life to that end.

"Sam was true to me, body and soul. What I said was law. He aided me in my scheme, by procuring me weapons, clothes and such articles as I needed. Then I watched my chance. It soon came.

"Sam brought me the word. Christopher Hawksley was at my house. I hastened there, cool and calm as I am now, though I had resolved that they both should die that night.

"I kept my oath. They were together in my wife's room. They never left it alive. I shot him, and entered the room. The woman who had been my wife, fell upon her knees and begged for mercy, swearing that she was innocent.

"I raised my hand and struck her. She fell forward.

"His death only inspired me with a ferocious joy. I gloried in my act of vengeance. But when I saw her lying there, gasping out her life, I changed. I had loved her so tenderly and true, until she fell from me. I had idolized her almost."

The old man choked and paused. Ned, pale and horror-stricken, did not speak. Then Mestayer, with an effort, resumed, his head bowed upon his hands, his voice sounding like that of one talking in a dream.

"How long I remained there I do not know, but it must have been for hours. The alarm was given by some one who had heard the shot and investigated it. The neighbors came and found me sitting there, *her* head upon my breast, her form clasped tight to my heart. Despite this they knew that I was the murderer. My revolver lay there, with one chamber discharged,

as the blue gas around the tube showed, recently. My knife—with initials carved upon the horn handle—was beside me.

"They say that I acted like a madman when they tried to remove her body. But numbers prevailed, and I was bound. The next I remember I was in the county jail, tried and condemned to death. But trusty Sam didn't fail me.

"He set me free—I have not patience now to tell all that he had to do, but he was at work for three nights before I was set free. Then, just as I mounted the horse he had brought for my use, we were discovered. Sam struck the horse a heavy blow that maddened it, and I was saved, though I tried to turn and aid him.

"Yes, he—the simple unlearned negro—he saved me at the cost of his own life. He was shot, but he kept the guards engaged until I was beyond their reach. Thus I lost my only friend.

"I had only one thing to live for, *revenge*. I swore to devote my life to that one end—and I have not yet forgotten my oath. For a time I kept in hiding, but then I set to work. *You* are the first one that knows, for a certainty, how your father died. I shot him."

Ned uttered a hoarse cry, and strove to arise, his eyes blazing with horror and vengeance. But the strong cords restrained his fury.

"And why—what had he done to you?"

"I have told you. Besides, I swore that I would destroy the entire race of the Hawksleys and Campbells. Boy, my wife was your father's sister."

Ned listened in astonishment. Until now he had believed his father had been an only child. But there was something in the old man's tones that told him he was speaking the truth.

"I am telling you the truth, though you seem to doubt it. But that matters little. I need only tell you a little more. After I shot your father, I had to hide again. I fled to New Orleans. While there, I met a Spanish Creole and married her. Had she lived, I might have reformed, for I loved her with all my hot, fiery nature. But she died, leaving me one babe—you have seen her here—Lola.

"For a time I lived in retirement, caring only for my child, teaching her, as she grew older, to hate all mankind but her father. I succeeded as I thought. Then I left her at school, and set forth to strike another blow. I found my enemies gone. They had removed, and I feared to inquire of those who could have told me where, lest I should be recognized.

"For years I hunted you like a wolf—you and the Hawksleys. I did not find you until this spring. By chance I found this retreat, and fitted it up for use. Then I brought Lola here. You remember the excitement that she caused, as the strange rider—a better name would have been *decoy*, for that was her duty. I first gained her good views of those I hated—just how does not matter now.

"Her first success was in luring Fred Hawksley here. Then I stole away his sister—your betrothed, as you say. *You* came next. After you will come your sister, Mary Colton. Then the rest of the Hawksleys. Before forty-eight

hours roll by, all of those included in my vow of vengeance will be dead—*dead*, do you hear?" hissed Mestayer, in a low, malignant tone of voice.

"But Fannie—you have not—"

"It matters little to *you* whether she be dead or not. If not, she will be soon. So will you. But I need the fresh air. I leave you to think of what I have told you, and to compose your mind for what is to come. If you sleep, pleasant dreams—ha! ha!" and laughing malignantly, the monomaniac left the chamber.

The conflicting emotions that racked Ned's mind on hearing this strange disclosure, can scarcely be imagined—most certainly not described. Besides clearing up the mystery that had enshrouded his father's murder, it also revealed to him the full peril that threatened his own as well as the lives of his friends.

So deeply buried was he in thought that he did not hear the soft footfall, nor the faint rustle as Lola, the Girl Rider, seated herself beside him. Her large, dark eyes were filled with a gentle light foreign to her fiery, passionate nature, and her cheek glowed with the swift flow of blood.

As Ned, aroused by that strange consciousness one feels when being fixedly gazed upon, raised his eyes, his face darkened with a frown. In a harsh tone he uttered:

"Well, I am waiting. Proceed. Of course you come here to tell me some frightful story of how I have wronged you, possibly, through my great-grandchildren, or something of that sort, and that you have sworn deadly vengeance against me and mine. Proceed—but for pity sake, cut it short."

"You wrong me, Ned," and Lola's voice sounded low and soft. "I am no enemy of yours; I would be your friend, if you would permit."

"My friend—and *his* daughter?"

"I often think that I am *not* his daughter—that he is mad—a monomaniac, who does not know what he does or says. I overheard what he told you, for I feared that he meant to kill you, and I resolved to prevent that, if it cost my own life. It is the same story, almost word for word, that he has told me scores of times. But—whether that is true or not—I am not your enemy, since seeing you. Before, I hated you, because he taught me to do so. He made me believe that all men were evil, treacherous beings, but—I don't think *you* are," and Lola drooped her eyes before the steady gaze of the young hunter.

"What is your object in telling me this?" he asked, slowly.

"To prove to you that I am a friend, not an enemy, as you seemed to regard me."

"Will you prove this? You can, if you wish. Will you do it?" added Ned, with ill-suppressed eagerness.

"How can I?" softly, with a quick glance at him.

"Easily. Unloosen these cords, restore my weapons, and I will believe that you are a true, earnest friend."

"So that you might kill my father?"

"No. I would not harm him unless he first attacked me. Then I would defend myself."

"He would kill me!"

"With me you would be safe. I will take you to any point you wish, or, if you would rather, my mother will welcome you to her home."

Their gaze met, but only for a moment, then the eyes of the Girl Rider sunk, and a low sigh fluttered her lips. The face of the young hunter, though open and earnest, had not told her the tale she wished and hoped to hear.

"You asked my father about your friends. He gave you to understand that they were dead. One of them still lives."

"What—Fannie—" eagerly began Ned, his dark eyes gleaming.

"No—the young man," and Lola's face turned a shade paler.

"Merciful God!" groaned Ned, quivering with intense heart-agony.

"Then it is true, as you told father—you loved this girl?"

"Better than my life! And now—but no—you are only trying me," he added, looking up imploringly. "Tell me she is still living?"

"Why should I lie to you? She is dead—but her blood is not on his hands. He fought to save her, but one of the men shot her, as he was bringing her here. The other—your friend, still lives, though badly wounded. Could I believe in your gratitude, I would set both yourself and him free."

"You crush all my hopes, then taunt me with freedom. I have nothing to live for now," bitterly replied Ned.

"Your mother?"

"True, I forget for a moment. Well, speak plain. What pledge do you require? What do you wish me to do?" he added, wearily.

"Make me a solemn promise—pledge me your honor as a gentleman to make me your—your wife, and I will free you both."

"What?"

"Let me finish. I know that my words seem strange, but consider what my past life has been. And yet, I have only obeyed my father. I have never sinned of my own free will. He thinks me all ice, but I can love, I *do* love; I have loved with all my soul ever since you came here. Now you know my heart. To win your love I am willing to disown father—all else."

"I have no love to give you. It was all *hers*—my poor, lost Fannie's," muttered Ned, yet strongly affected by the passionate, yet pleading tones of the strange girl.

"You will in time—I do not ask nor expect it all at once. I will love you so tenderly and wholly that you *must* return it, in time."

"If you loved me as you say, you would free me and trust to my gratitude for your reward."

"And thus lose you forever? No—no! I would rather, far rather kill you here, then take my own life, than to run that risk," cried Lola, her eyes flaming.

A strange temptation was upon him. Why not dissimulate—or even give a positive pledge, if by these means he could gain freedom?

"Wait—I must think of this a little. I cannot answer you now," he said, at length.

"You must be quick, for there's no time to lose. Father will soon return. And he is looking for his messenger, sent to bring a band of savages here. They intend attacking the settlements, when your mother, sister, and the

Hawksley family will be captured. Decide quickly, and you may be in time to save them," cried the Girl Rider.

CHAPTER X.

THE CLEW.

THOUGH Chigilli, the Kiowa chief, had acted so promptly in dispatching a runner for reinforcements, that fact was likely to avail him little, for the movements of the settlers were prompt and decided. The outlaw, James Mestayer, was the cause of this.

First, Jack Colton had recognized him, and now, recovered from the effects of his fall, was eager to attack them. Then Archibald Hawksley, in the confused struggle, believed that in him he saw the abductor of his daughter.

Though it was Albert Mestayer who performed that deed, his disguise had made him look like a much younger man, and there was a family resemblance between the uncle and nephew, so that Hawksley's mistake was natural.

A plan of attack, bold and daring, was quickly arranged.

"Jack Colton, you will take one-half of the men, and I'll lead the others," hurriedly commanded Hawksley. "You go to the right and gain the foot of the hill. Then when I give the signal, close in. But remember, the white man must be taken *alive*."

Separating, the two parties rode up to the hill base, then dismounting, drew their revolvers, ready for work. At the signal they glided rapidly along, and soon reached the defile before a shot was fired.

Then ensued a scene of frightful confusion. It was not a fight that can be drawn in words, for each man fought on his own hook, singling out his foe with eyes for naught else.

Though brief, it was bloody in the extreme. For a few moments the Kiowas fought bravely, but then the rapid detonation of the white men's revolvers proved too much for their courage, and the survivors fled up the hollow, only to encounter another foe.

Zeb Ruel and his two companions, Fenton and Morley, being out of sight of their comrades below, knew nothing of their movements until the sound of firearms, together with vengeful shouts and shrill cries, announced the commencement of the struggle. Divining the truth, they began descending the ridge side, in order to assist their comrades.

Though too late to take part in the struggle proper, the fleeing red-skins ran headlong against their weapons. Three rifle-cracks, and only two Kiowas remained, standing bewildered by this new and unexpected danger. Then, amidst a storm of revolver bullets, they tried to scale the steep hill, but ere half-way to its top, the last Kiowa flung aloft his arms, and rolled back to the base, dead.

Mestayer had fought bravely, but his time had come. Both Colton and Hawksley assailed him. Colton fell, with a bullet-hole through his breast, but before the outlaw could do more, Hawksley was upon him.

In the desperate struggle that ensued, his wounds aided in giving the settler the victory, and ere the last reports echoed from up the valley, Mestayer was securely bound, a prisoner.

"Who is't ye've got, Hawksley?" cried Zeb Ruel, coming up at this moment. "Hellow, Jap Morton, as I'm a sinner!"

"The man that carried off Fannie, I believe," but the settler hesitated as he now for the first time took a good square look at his captive.

"I never stole her—I know nothing about the matter," sullenly replied Mestayer, his eyes drooping.

"You lie, villain!" snarled Hawksley, springing upon the prostrate figure. "Tell me—tell me quick, or I'll choke the vile life out of your carcass!"

"Easy—easy, neighbor," quoth Ruel, as he dragged the infuriated settler from his victim. "A feller can't easy speak when his thrapple is shet tight in a vise. Leave the or'nery cuss to me. I'll bring him round, I reckon. D' y' hear, Jap Morton? Best tell me what ye know."

"I'll tell ye all I know. It's not much, but it'll show you that I had no hand in the matter. It was the Barranca Wolf—Albert Mestayer, in disguise—who deceived you and stole your daughter. You may not believe it, for the report was spread long ago that he was dead. Have you forgotten the man who killed your brother, Christopher Hawksley?"

The settler staggered back as though dealt a deadly blow. Seeing his agitation, Ruel took up the examination.

"What'd he steal her fer!"

"Revenge. Hawksley knows for what!"

"I do—go on," faintly muttered the settler.

"He was met on his return by three men—part of those who—who burned Colton's house. They, in the dim light, thought it was me, and they believed that I had betrayed them in that matter. There was a fight, in which the old man shot two, when the other made off. His horse had been hurt, and so was the girl. She was shot in the side. If you followed his trail, you must have lost it in the river. He rode there, and seeing that his horse was nearly dead, he shot him and sent it floating down-stream, to cover his trail. Then he waded up-stream, finally reaching his retreat."

"Where is that?"

"In the *barranca* that cuts through the ten-mile prairie. In the east side is concealed a good-sized cave. That is the Wolf's den."

"And the gal?" asked Ruel, in answer to a sign from the agitated father.

"I don't know whether she is living or not. Old Mestayer told me that she was fatally wounded."

"A durned lie; don't yer b'lieve him, neighbor," splurged Ruel, as Hawksley sunk to the ground with a bitter groan. "Now, what of Fred Hawksley? An' who is that gal that he rid a'ter!"

"Mestayer's daughter. Fred is hidden there but he is crazy. The old Wolf hit him on the head with a club and injured his brain."

"Ask him about Ned," suggested Fenton.

"If you mean Ned Campbell, he's there, too," quickly replied Mestayer.

"Ge-long to thunderation! A hull nestfull—any more?" spluttered Ruel, amazed.

"No." Then adding quickly, "Now I have told you all, you will set me free?"

"Not much—sca'cely! How d' we know but it's all a pesky lie, jist hatched up as you went along? No, sir; your part o' the barg'in don't end ontel a'ter you show us this wonderful hole in the ground, an' we see how matters stan'."

"Come," said Hawksley, in a strained, unnaturally still voice, "we are losing time here; let us be riding."

"Co-rect. Git yer horses, boys! I'll ketch one fer this chap. He's got to show us the Wolf's den, or I'll know the why."

Mestayer was mounted upon one of the spare horses, and tied firmly to the saddle. Ruel rode beside him, while Hawksley led the way.

The ten miles were soon covered, and the party found themselves at the *barranca*. Dismounting, they silently approached the spot indicated by the Barranca Wolf's nephew.

CHAPTER XI.

NED'S DOUBLE SURPRISE.

FOR a time Nimble Ned remained silent, deep-buried in thought. The temptation was strong, and he was slowly yielding to it.

Lola watched him closely, and as her keen eye, sharpened by love the most intense and passionate, read the quick changes of his handsome countenance, her heart beat high with hope that he was about to consent. The inward conflict sickened her, and she staggered like one drunken, as she rose, muttering, in a husky, unnatural, voice:

"Think well over it, but decide quickly. There is no time to lose, if you would be saved. I must seek the fresh air—I am choking!"

It did not take him long to decide. He resolved to accept her terms in seeming, until he was free.

He had scarcely arrived at this determination when Lola hastily entered, her countenance flushed, her eyes glowing.

"Quickly your answer—my father is coming!" she hurriedly uttered, reaching his side.

"I consent—provided you assist me in freeing Fred, also."

"I will—you shall never regret your choice, if my love can repay you. But now—there's his step. Pretend to sleep, as he may suspect something," she hastily added.

Though strongly agitated, Ned managed to quiet his nerves in seeming, and as the old Wolf entered, his suspicious glance saw only a sleeping captive and a drowsy sentinel, her head bowed upon her breast.

"Lola, you may go now and lie down. You must be sleepy."

The Girl Rider arose and retired, though with reluctance. She seemed ill at ease, and to suspect danger to the one she had so suddenly given her heart, in the ill-suppressed excitement of the old man. One hand sought the pistol at her waist, and she crouched down in the passage, listening intently, ready to interfere should her fears prove well founded.

The Barranca Wolf touched Ned lightly upon the shoulder, then laughed aloud at the air of well-dissimulated surprise worn by his face as the young man opened his eyes with a start.

"A change in your watcher, you see; and I suppose you think a disagreeable one. You sleep sound, young man. That is a blessing, if

you only think so. But that reminds me—I have something to tell you regarding your friends."

"Who—what?" stammered Ned, really surprised.

"Of Hawksley, Ruel and the others who were with you when you were hunting for the girl. They have apparently become alarmed at your long absence, and have been trailing you."

"If so, I don't see why *you* should laugh."

"Because you don't know all. You remember where you left your horse? Well, I sent a friend—one whom you may have known as Jasper Morton—I sent him *on your horse* to hasten up my friends. Now do you see? They—*your* friends, have traced your trail out several miles beyond this, and are camping there, intending to follow on in the morning. Now do you see why I laugh?"

"No."

"Bah! you are dull—very stupid. Well then, I am sworn brother to Chigilli, the Kiowa chief. He is waiting for me to send him word when all is in readiness for him to strike a blow at the settlement. My nephew is to bring them on—seventy-five strong. He has my instructions to follow back his trail—and to kill or capture all who may be upon it. This is why I laughed. I have just been scouting round them, so close that I could have picked off any one of their number, had that been my wish. But I have a different fate in store for Hawksley—the rest I care not for. Now then, you have something more to ponder over. You should thank me for keeping your mind from rusting—but I have long since ceased to look for gratitude from those of my race. Ha! ha!"

Ned did not reply, and the old man sunk into a reverie that lasted for hours. At length he was aroused by Lola, who told him that day was dawning. The old man arose and emerged from the chamber, while after a quiet greeting to Ned, Lola busied herself with preparations for the morning meal.

For an hour after sunrise, Mestayer watched at the edge of the *barranca*, yet so close to the den that Lola could not put her resolve of freeing Ned into execution, without the certainty of a deadly collision between him and her father, an extremity that she could not as yet bring herself to brave. But she regretted not having done so, when Mestayer reappeared and made her bring forth her pony.

As she reluctantly obeyed, Ned saw that the horses were kept concealed in an apartment of the cave. Mestayer spoke decisively, and Lola dared not disobey.

"You will ride out along the trail that I told you of, and see if you can see anything of our friends. Do not go beyond the creek, but wait there, if needs be, for half an hour. If you do not see them then, hasten back."

The Girl Rider emerged from the *barranca* and dashed away over the prairie with lightning speed. Mestayer resumed his position as lookout, his eyes eagerly following the swiftly flying figure of his daughter.

Ned had read aright the quick glance thrown at him by Lola. She feared that she could not effect his release until too late. His heart sunk within him, and he closed his eyes in deep and troubled reflection.

However, he was to be aroused ere long. A low, faint rustle came from beyond, and then a figure appeared at the angle behind which Ned had frequently observed Mestayer disappear.

A face that bore an excited yet troubled look; pale and worn, yet very beautiful. The large, wild-looking eyes rested upon the form of the young hunter as he lay upon the couch, and the lips parted, the arms outstretched, as with a low cry, the figure glided forward.

In amazement Ned raised his eyes. Then a low, glad cry broke from his lips as he recognized in the figure that of his dearly beloved one, Fannie Hawksley. He tried to outstretch his arms, but the attempt recalled his situation.

"Ned—thank God! I am in time!" gasped the maiden, dropping upon her knees beside the pallet. "Think what I must have suffered. I have heard every thing that was said here. I heard the lies they told you, and had no power to deny them, for I was bound hand and foot and gagged."

As she spoke, Fannie with trembling fingers strove to release her lover, but the hard-knotted cords resisted her efforts.

"Fannie, my poor darling, you can do no good without a knife. There must be some lying in the outer room. You will not be afraid to look?"

"Not when it is for you," she bravely returned, and gliding through the passage, she quickly secured what she sought, together with a brace of pistols that she had snatched from the table.

"My precious darling!" murmured Ned, as the cords yielded to the keen weapon, and springing to his feet he clasped Fannie to his wildly throbbing heart; but fortunately she was the most composed of the two.

"Take the pistols, Ned. You may need them. Now—we have no time to lose. Come—you must help me to set Fred free. He is kept a prisoner in here, too. Hasten—"

"Too late! Back, Fannie—get behind me," hastily muttered Ned, as the echo of a quick step came to his ears from the outer chamber.

A simultaneous cry followed the appearance of the figure, and Ned's pistol muzzle slightly fell as he saw it covered the heart of the strange girl, Lola Mestayer.

"You free?" she cried, in amazement; "but come—there's no time to lose. You must meet my father, but it is the only chance. The Indians are coming up like the wind. You can hide in— My God! who is that?" she abruptly added, for the first time observing the shrinking figure of Fannie.

"My promised wife—the one you so falsely swore was dead," sternly replied Ned.

"It was for love of you that I lied; but I will make my words good!" hissed the maddened girl, as her bright pistol was leveled toward Fannie.

The report followed swiftly, but the low exclamation that broke the air came out from the maiden's lips. Ned had sprung before his love, himself receiving the bullet. His left arm hung helpless at his side.

"Forgive me—oh, forgive me!" cried Lola, as she observed the effect of her mad act. "I would rather that bullet had pierced my heart than to harm you!"

A hoarse cry came echoing from without. The three inmates of the chamber experienced a thrill as they divined its purport. Mestayer had heard the confusion, and was coming to investigate it.

Two clicks sounded through the chamber. Ned cocked his pistols. So did Lola. The eyes of all were turned toward the entrance. They had not long to wait, for the next moment Mestayer, the Barranca Wolf, burst into the chamber, his eyes ablaze, his hand clutching a revolver.

"What is this—who set you free?" he cried hoarsely, as he noticed Ned standing erect, pale but defiant. "Ha! you did—traitress!" and his pistol covered Lola's heart.

"No—I did it," tremblingly cried Fannie, as she saw the peril of one innocent.

"You, too!" for the first time noticing the maiden. "Fortunately I am prepared for it. Now, sir," he added, in a cold, deadly tone, "drop your pistol, or I'll shoot you down like a dog."

"Two can play at that game. Stand aside and let us pass," uttered Ned, as with a rapid motion he raised his pistol to a level.

His pistol spoke, and the bullet claimed a victim. But not the one at whose life he had aimed. The Girl Rider sprung forward, shielding with her body the life of the man whom she so madly loved.

With a groan of agony she sunk down upon the blood-sprinkled floor, her young life going out as she gasped a name—the name of him she had saved from death.

With a howl of fury, Ned fired twice in quick succession, but the last shot was superfluous. The Barranca Wolf—the murderer of his father, was dead—shot through the brain.

From without there came loud, excited cries, and he had not understood the speech of Lola. He believed them also enemies. But then as he recognized the foremost, Archibald Hawksley and Zeb Ruel, he muttered a thanksgiving and fainted.

But little more need be added, for the meeting and little explanations may be left to the reader's imagination. Fred Hawksley was found, bound and gagged, but unhurt save from the blow given him by Mestayer when the beautiful decoy had lured him to the den.

As the party left the cave, it was found that James Mestayer had disappeared, but two days afterward he was found. Fearing death, he had urged his horse to break its fastenings, though he himself was still firmly bound. In the mad gallop that ensued, his saddle turned and he, falling beneath the mustang, had met his death.

The Kiowas, awed by the death of their chief, quietly retreated to their hunting-grounds, and the threatened Indian war blew over.

Of course Ned and Fannie were married, now that Fred was found, and equally of course, Zeb Ruel and the rest of the young hunters were gay and welcome guests.

Albert Mestayer and his ill-fated daughter, Lola, the Girl Rider, were interred in one grave upon the banks of the *barranca*; but their strange story did not die for many a year, and is yet occasionally alluded to in that section.

THE END.

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